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Rich, Attractive People Doing Attractive Things in Attractive Places
- *A Monologue from Hell* –

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by Tonya Walker, Master of Fine Arts Candidate

Major Director: Tom De Haven, Professor, Department of English

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Abstract

RICH, ATTRACTIVE PEOPLE IN ATTRACTIVE PLACES DOING ATTRACTIVE THINGS

By Tonya Walker, M.F.A.

A these submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: Tom De Haven, Professor, Department of English

Rich, Attractive People in Attractive Places Doing Attractive Things is a fictional memoir of a dead Manhattan socialite from the 1950's named Sunny Marcus. The novel is Sunny's monologue from Hell and features many well-known figures from American pop culture including Truman Capote, Ernst Hemingway, Clark Gable, William Powell and Babe Paley. It traces the upward trajectory of Sunny's life from a modest childhood in 1920's Los Angeles to the heights of social success in the unforgiving world of Café Society to her murder.

It may be that the enduring swan glides upon waters of liquefied lucre; but that cannot account for the creature herself—her talent, like all talent, is composed of unpurchasable substances. For a swan is invariably the result of adherence to some aesthetic system of thought, a code transposed into a self-portrait; what we see is the imaginary portrait precisely projected.

Truman Capote

Every rainy day, when I couldn't be on the beach, I'd walk around the lake, where I used to watch the swans by the hour. The beauty of those swans! Of course they're angry beasts, like peacocks; but where peacocks are common, there's nothing common about swans.

Diana Vreeland

I believe in fairy tales. For six decades I have concentrated on photographing attractive people who were doing attractive things in attractive places.

Slim Aaron

Prologue

We were from the generation before the generation that let it all hang out. We were Truman Capote's swans.

The swans that Tru cultivated were the lovely ladies of New York society. We weren't all from New York, but like homing pigeons, it was a place we returned to again and again. He christened us his swans because of our beauty, elegance, and curiously long necks. Writer George Plimpton counted Babe Paley, Marella Agnelli, Gloria Vanderbilt, Gloria Guinness, Slim Keith, and I among the pack. Like Ivy League schools, everyone's list combines a slightly different group. However, in every permutation of Tru's flock, the undisputed Swan queen was the exquisite Babe Paley, at one time my dear, dear friend. Next in line was the Swan-abee Gloria "The Ultimate" Guinness, so dubbed because she always had the in ultimate clothing, jewels and men. I found her quite vulgar. The Ultimate is followed by Pamela Harriman, the Swan Whore. Her hobbies included politics and the entertainment of a high-powered array of lovers like Edward R. Murrow, CBS President William S. Paley – yes the husband of the Swan Queen - Jock Whitney, Averell Harriman and Elie de Rothschild. Pammy was probably the most accomplished of us all. She ended up Ambassador to France, but my goodness, what a bore! Politics, world events, she was earnest, earnest, earnest. Still, bore or no, she managed to mess with my life but good.

I, of course, was the other Swan, and thanks to Truman, the most infamous one.

In the spirit of full disclosure I should tell you I am dead. You should have gathered that from the subtitle, but not everybody reads subtitles. If you did you will also know that I am in Hell. No metaphor, this is not some cute way of saying I'm in New Jersey or Idaho or my mother-in-law's house. This is the real Hell - Satan, hopelessness, despair. Before you go too far picturing Dante's version I must stop you. I am not there - which is not to say it does not exist, just that I'm not there. Hell is, I suspect, custom-tailored to be punishment that fits the crime. And since I was fairly frivolous and highly social in life, concerned with few things more pressing than clothing and gossip, my Hell is nothing.

There is no color where I am. There are no people. I remain bodiless in a glaring white space, much like the bathroom I died in. There is nothing to see or hear. It is so desperate I'm not even sure that I am here. Maybe I have imagined this. I cannot trust my senses because technically I have none. So I think, and because I never learned anything in my lifetime to fuel my thoughts or foster new ones I think on me. And now I think on you. Yes, you. I've created you in my mind or what's left of it for me. You are for me to tell my story to. You are not real, but neither am I anymore so what does it matter?

If I think hard enough of a time or a place in my life sometimes images emerge. Sometimes I get to actually see and hear the places and times I am thinking about in my mind and that is my reward. For a few moments I get some distraction from my own thoughts and this merciless white glare.

I make you no promises. I may not be able to conjure a memoir or a monologue. We may get only a garbled collection of images. Or we might get a full auto-biography.

If we get a bizarre bunch of incohesive scenes too bizarre to be believable we'll call this post-modernist fiction and be done with it. I don't care, as long as I get something to distract me from my relentless nothingness.

Chapter One

My funeral was not as well attended as it should have been. Bad timing really. What a difference a decade makes - actually twenty-two years, I'm so used to shaving years off my birth date I shave them off my death date automatically.

My murder on the other hand was exquisite.

Elegant and well-planned, it remains undetected. I don't even blame my grim reaper for ending my life, I suffered no pain, he saw to that. It might have been revenge, but he wasn't vengeful. And truly by the time he slipped into my apartment my body was barely sputtering.

I designed a lovely bathroom, white. Arctic snow. A pure, clean gray white. Imagine white absent of warmth, completely tiled – even the ceiling – if my maid Marta cursed the grout once she cursed it a thousand times. If we create our own heaven – I'm still not sure – then we create our own hell, too. Marta's hell is a room with endless white tiles and endless grout.

They found me on my bathroom floor, arranged on the oversized terrycloth bath mat. Truman was the one who called for help. He popped by to bring me a present, one of his famous snakebite kits. Accidental overdose, the coroner deemed it. No surprise really, considering all the meds I was on, and of course, I was a lavish drunk, nobody denied that. Truman was questioned of course. Our falling out was famous. But he easily proved we'd started up a friendship again, 'made our peace.' I had visited his apartment in recent years, as his doorman later attested.

Tru created hundreds of these snakebite kits, and gave them to the significant in his life. He covered each box with bits of colored and metallic paper. Very clever things – some astonishingly pretty. He glued images he snipped from magazines and newspapers or even art books – he was terribly irreverent about his books, odd for a writer. Sort of cannibalistic. Tru considered this gift an honor. Mine was covered in yellow paste stones and jet beads.

Post-death I'm simply delighted with how pre-occupied people are with me, how my name has become an adjective for American style. 'The original California girl,' that's what they call me. America needs us now more than ever, icons to her industry and self-importance. Proof that all that glitters is gold – high-end, high-brow and precious. We weren't exactly Grande dames, but we sure as hell were great dames. Even that Harriman whore, she wasn't American of course, though she did manage to win the American Ambassadorship to France. With her talents she assimilated quickly – tea and fellatio. It's all in the steeping I understand.

I don't see Pamela Harriman here in Hell, but I know she must be. The space is quite white, noticeably white, not eggshell or ivory, but stark, high noon white. Which is strange, because I'd always envisioned Hell red; however, the white is more disturbing, even suffocating. I can see nothing else. I wonder how long I will be here. I expected I'd run into all sorts of folks in the afterlife. Kind of like a gauzy Piccadilly Circus or *Gare St. Lazare*, where you eventually run into everyone you know. Perhaps they are all here, maybe my version of hell is being alone – Christ, I hope I was more complicated than that. Yes, I take the Lord's name in vain whenever I want to now. I'm kind of like one of

those Scottish Covenanters who believes because of predestination that whatever act they commit is okay because they are either chosen by God to be saved or going to Hell anyway.

I wasn't the most attractive Swan – that would be Babe – though I was pretty damn gorgeous. 5'9" (at death I measured 5'7" – too much bourbon, not enough Goddamn milk), skinny, skinny, skinny, with legs like muscled straws and brush loads of gold-colored hair marked by a platinum skunk-stripe right in the front, around my face. That skunk stripe was my claim to fame, completely natural, at least initially. Bazaar editor Carmel Snow rhapsodized about it, and my ability to wear clothes well. But as any mannequin will tell you, that gift has little to do with mythical style and everything to do with long, visible bones.

I would hate to be a young woman right now, too exhausting. All that jabber about having it all or not having it all - terribly unattractive. Why should the 'all' involve a work ethic? Tiresome feminists. Anybody can work. It takes a lot of personal style to avoid it. Being interesting is a far greater accomplishment than reading a balance sheet. Who wants to talk about balance sheets? The only things worth talking about are people and art after that it's just administration.

So I will talk about me. You should have a sense of where I came from – if only so you can be suitably impressed by where I went.

Why now? Why tell you about me twenty-two years later? Because you don't know me really and you should. You want to. Your need to know me is why there are two - not one but two - Truman Capote films out. It's why lovely, buttery, leather gloves are back

in fashion for daytime, why brooches and garnets are enjoying a renaissance. It's why my friend, society photographer Slim Aarons, that lanky, tall drink of water, re-released his book *A Wonderful Life*, a collection of photographs of the beautiful people from six decades and was able to sell it for \$75. Seventy-five dollars. Outrageous. In 1948 Clark Gable filled my hotel room with flowers for \$10; took me to a scrumptious dinner in New York City that I, of course would never finish, for \$2.50; successfully seduced me in his full-floor terraced apartment at 57th and Park rented for a mere \$63 a month.

Until now I have been only a footnote in Truman Capote's life story. Now I want him for a footnote to mine. My name is Abigail Gross Hayden Marcus, but you can call me Sunny.

Chapter Two

“Dammit, where is she? Abigail!” My father’s voice could be heard all around Boyle Heights. He was such a bastard. Still I came running.

“Yes,” I shouted back, after my skinny legs came to a halt directly in front of him. He slapped me across the face for my impertinence. I had learned not to flinch, that just angered him further. I had a problem with authority, even at ten.

“Go help your mother. Dr. Seymour just dropped off his laundry.”

Rather than pick up the basket himself and walk it to the wash basin, a journey of no more than twelve feet, he had, instead, chosen the longer route of walking into the street and calling me back from a neighbor’s yard.

I simply stood there looking at him, hating him.

He slapped me again, this time with his fist partially clothed so that the knuckles made more of an impact. “Go, girl, now, before I make you.”

Cross the Los Angeles River, east from downtown and southeast of Hollywood you’ll find a neighborhood called Boyle Heights, my old stomping grounds. It’s an area bound by the river, Brooklyn Ave., Indiana St., and 9th St. Named for an Irish immigrant, Andrew Boyle who in keeping with his booze-soaked Irish heritage operated a vineyard and winery in the vicinity. Boyle Heights was one of the places to live in 1880, chock full of fine homes and tended gardens.

Unfortunately, we - my mother, father, brother and I - lived here in the twenties. The mansions had dissolved into rooming houses and tiny flats. Newer, small houses surrounded these faded beauties. We occupied the first-floor rooms of a disfigured gray mansion on Whittier Blvd. Henry my brother and I shared a bedroom on one side of the kitchen and mom and dad shared a room on the other. A huge stone fireplace dominated our main room, which was our kitchen, salon, office and playroom - it would have been a playroom had we had such things back then, and had my father not been such a bastard.

My father worked at The California Rotogravure Company Plant on East 11th Street. It was a small one story brick and glass building walking distance from our rooms where several weekly and monthly publications were printed. This was the only reason he would put up with an area that had become - in his precise language - 'infested' with Jews. That and of course, rent was cheap which allowed the stingy bigot to salt away as much cash as his stingy hands could grasp. He designed pages for the art department. Since the publications were fairly static this was repetitive, dull work which he complained bitterly about.

My father's main love was writing. I guess his only love. He typed reams and reams of words on his black Smith Corolla. He'd stuff them away in a worn leather folder, until the next night when he'd tear up the pages and start again. I never read a word he wrote. After he left us there wasn't a scrap of paper left in the house. I never thought about peeking into the folder when I had the chance, but now I wish I had. Writers I suppose hold a certain charm for me.

I was my brother's keeper. Henry had tufted white hair and impossibly bushy eyebrows over wide-set peacock blue eyes. His skin was the color of Hawaiian gold - sunny pink, jam-packed with enough collagen to service the half the lips on Upper East Side. If I allow myself to get quiet enough, I can still feels his skin on my lips. He was my father's pride. Conversely father treated me like a dim scullery maid he longed to brain. Instead of being jealous of my brother I doted on him, mostly because he loved me so much. He trailed after me everywhere. From the moment he could figure out how to climb out of his crib he became my shadow. Every morning he scaled the bars of his bed, toddled to mine and snuggled in with me.

I took him with me wherever I went while mom worked on other people's laundry. She was an excellent laundress. She could tease the stain out of any fabric. Under the kitchen sink she kept a whole laboratory of ingredients and potions she would mix like a chemist concocting an elixir of health. These were her stain fighters. Henry, and I were expressly forbidden to play there, so we'd go outside collect old cans from our trash and make our own potent potions.

Henry and I made extra money on Boyle Avenue during the week when we weren't playing. The main business street, Boyle Avenue, was lined with large open-air fruit and vegetable stands, 5 and dimes, fish stalls and kosher markets. We had a shoe-shining kit my mother's friend Mr. Steiner gave us. Mr. Steiner owned the 5 and dime and sometimes gave us little presents because he was sweet on Mutti. He was always telling me to say hello to her for him and to let her know what great new deals he had in the store. Henry and I set up on the street corners to compete with the sulky Mexican

boys with their shoeshine equipment slung over their shoulders. They were fast, but aggressive, heckling their customers rather than cajoling. Henry and I were blond and nice to look at while our customers got a bright shine on their toes. If ever anybody got funny with us we'd turn tail fast and dash into Mr. Steiner's store. But that didn't happen so often, I think the Mexicans had more problems with funny men then we did.

When we'd earned some money I'd take Henry to Mr Steiner's and let him pick out three pieces of penny candy. His chubby fingers would always grab for the black licorice cigars with the dusting of tiny white dots at the end. It was a funny sight this lovely blond baby all dimpled and glowing chomping on a fat cigar like he was Louis B. Mayer. Usually we'd take our candy hoard to Hollenbeck Park which was just off South Boyle. It had a pretty five-acre lake hidden behind the steep hills. Most of the neighborhood kids hung out there to trade candy and just play by the water. You'd never be allowed to do that today of course. Signs would be posted, lawsuits would be pending and all manner of restrictions placed on visitors just looking for a lovely view. Then again few ten and three-year-olds today would be allowed to roam as freely as we did - more's the pity.

Late in November I was helping mom outside with her never-ending laundry. It was a two person job to fold heavy cotton sheets over the fraying clothes line. Henry napped inside and Father grimly tapped away at his manuscript. It was a cold, crisp day, the sheet was going to take forever to dry, but mom wanted it in the sun to bleach it, even if it was a cold sun. Mutti had built a tall fire inside the hearth before we went out thinking Father would be there to watch it. She had moved the kitchen table closer to the

fire so his hands would be warm while he was typing. Father, evidently reaching a rough patch in his book, had decided to go for a walk. While he was out the fire cracked on fiercely.

Henry, awoke from his nap. Finding none of the usual grinning faces to greet him he crawled out of his crib - despite his chub he was quite agile. He headed straight for the low pots and pans cupboard, his favorite. Dragging the pots to the fireside he started to clang them, I suppose. Sparks were tripping from the fireplace, and a fat one landed on Mutti's tablecloth. It smoldered and slowly ate away at the tablecloth until it reached Father's manuscript. It was here, the firemen estimate that the fire came to life.

We didn't notice for a while. Smoky smells emitted from everyone's chimney that day, plus that damn sheet was so heavy to move it took all our concentration. A neighbor's yell called our attention to the clouds of smoke pouring from the half-opened door father hadn't bothered to shut when he left. Mutti and I rushed inside. She pushed me back, but not before I saw our whole kitchen table in flames and Henry's small form lying by the hearth. "Henry!" I screamed in horror and tried to run past mom. Someone pulled me out and Mutti ran to save Henry.

If you've got a decent mother, a father is superfluous - especially one with impossibly high standards. But baby brothers, they're like surrogate sons when you're ten. A real live baby doll that gives damp kisses, offers soft, squidgy hands and jiggly, belly giggles.

The whole room was engulfed in smoke. It was the smoke that choked life from Henry we were told. Father blamed us both.

The Volunteer Fire Department put out the fire quickly. Mutti gently sponged Henry outside in a metal tub and brought him into our undamaged room to clothe him. She wrapped him in his yellowed, nubby, flannel blanket. She cradled him to her to keep him warm - her lips against his damp, tangled hair. If he could just stay warm, she reasoned, he could not die. Still, somewhere inside her, she must have known he was already dead. She wouldn't let the doctor or father take him.

"Give him the boy, Margaret." My father quietly gestured to the doctor.

Mutti didn't seem to hear. She just kissed the top of his damp head again.

"Goddammit, I said give him the boy," Father's voice was flat, loud and ugly - as if he hated her, he'd always hated her and now he'd figured out why.

Mutti just held Henry closer. Father grabbed at Henry's feet bundled in the blanket,

"No!" I screamed and pushed Father. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. I threw myself around Mutti and Henry, shielding them.

"You useless little bitch, why did it have to be him? He's the only thing I give a damn about in this hellhole." The doctor stepped back in shock - he knew my father only as a quiet, withdrawn man unaware of his explosive temper. Recognizing the truth of his words had little effect on me. Nothing could touch the sharp pain I felt everywhere inside. He grasped my ankle from his position on the floor and pulled me to him. I held fast to Mutti's skirts and kicked at him, crying and screaming wildly.

“You,” I gulped, breathing heavily, unable to choke out my anger. “You killed him. You just as good as killed him. God took him away because of you, Papa. You didn’t deserve him. I love him, don’t, don’t touch him, Papa. I hate you.”

Papa yanked me hard; Henry’s limp body tumbled from Mutti’s arms. She keened like a dog. Papa punched me in the mouth, and tried to snatch Henry’s, but I threw myself on top of Henry’s small form sobbing. The doctor pulled father away from me. He scuffled with the doctor, and then stormed into his bedroom. He walked out minutes later, wordlessly, with a suitcase. Blood trickled down from the corner of my mouth.

Mutti and I buried Henry ourselves. We laid him to rest in the little cemetery beside Church of our Lady of Lourdes. It was a rather overpowering church dominated by a lofty, metal-capped corner tower, but the cemetery was close to our house and hopefully that powerful tower could guard over Henry better than we did.

We stayed in that horrible house a while longer. Sweet memories of Henry blotted out ugly memories of my father. I could not convince Mutti to leave. Her pretty face became lined with the pain of those two years we remained there. For those two years after Henry died. I’d wake up, my body stretched against one side of my twin bed. In my sleep I imagined Henry still snuggled beside me, claiming the lion’s share of the bed as his small body always did. Each morning I woke to his death as fresh as the throbbing in my head. I suppose I could have crawled in with Mutti, snuggled against her softness to avoid my memories, but I didn’t really want to escape them, they were the only remnants of Henry I had.

Mutti was remarkable. A well-built woman, the main evidence of her pain was her weight. Never overweight, she was now very slender, almost waif-like in her appearance. This new weight loss made her appear more youthful, delicate. A son dying and husband leaving all at once would be enough to embitter, if not devastate most. But Mutti claimed control of our lives. She took in sewing in the evenings and took on janitorial duties at the nearby L.A. county general hospital; I helped after school and on weekends, so we were able to scrape by. It was awful. We barely spoke in those years. We were too tired. Later, when she chose a seamier, but more lucrative career I was pleased for her. She had lived enough to know her heart and make trade-offs with her body. It was not a life she wanted for me, but it was the best of that profession. More courtesan, than prostitute, she choose her hours and her clients.

Papa died June 15, 1930 - the day I turned thirteen. We ate cake anyway. We had reason to celebrate. He never changed his will. Mother was bequeathed a substantial amount of cash. I suggested we move. Mainly, I wanted out of that house and its ugly soul-decaying grayness. Part of me thought the house killed Henry. That it conspired to destroy him because it was jealous of his yellow beauty.

We decided on that birthday to move, immediately. Mutti chose the Wilshire area of L.A., just the other side of the downtown plaza. She flirted with the idea of moving downtown because of it's proximity to the Biltmore where she retained an 'office.' But instead we found a lovely apartment house that had just been constructed the year before. Right on Wilshire Boulevard, our apartment was in the center of wonderful shops and

large department stores. Wilshire and the West sections of Los Angeles were expanding rapidly despite the depression. We lived at the corner of Wilshire and New Hampshire in a low rise building with a balcony overlooking I. Magnin Co.

This dazzling department store captured my imagination from the moment we moved in. It looked like it a tuxedoed doorman watching over the street. It was grounded in black granite, banded by nickel silver trim and topped with white Colorado Yule marble. I'd stare at the clean spare lines of that building for hours. The interior was decorated in shades of refined apricot lit with indirect light fixtures worthy of a Hollywood set. When one walked in - it was safe to say- one never looked lovelier.

Naturally when I was old enough to decorate for myself, my bedrooms were painted a captivating soft peach with careful lighting. Even in my twenties when I could have been lit by a torch and still looked delectable I was particular about my lighting. To the right of our two-bedroom apartment there stood the Bullock's Wilshire Building. Originally designed to be just a branch of the downtown store, it become the flagship store because the gorgeous design which incorporated terra cotta, green copper and glass. Most people don't tend to think of Los Angeles as a design-centric town, but when I was growing up there, before the strip-malls and roller derbies there were lovely buildings created to entice the eye of the passerby. It was here in the Wilshire Arms apartment that I began paying attention to clothing and design - to the effusive, and the effortless. I'd entertain myself for hours wandering in Bullocks and I. Magnin for afternoons, noting what the young matrons purchased and judging whether I would have spent my pin money that way.

One afternoon when I was fifteen I was admiring a pair of suede pumps in I. Magnin when I was approached by an older woman I'd seen work in the ladies dress department. I thought they'd finally had enough of me wandering the floors of their store, looking but never buying or maybe they'd seen me touch the cool black marble too many times, I just loved the feel of it, but maybe I'd left unsightly fingerprints or something. I gingerly placed the pump back on the table-top stand and raised myself to my full five feet and nine inches, trying to look unapproachable and dignified. I turned slowly pretending I didn't see her approach and walked toward the stairs. I reasoned if she didn't actually throw me out then I could still come back another day.

"Miss," she called to me, her heels tapping more rapidly on the marble floor and she tried to catch up with me.

"Yes," I swiveled around quickly, trying to look interrupted and very important.

"How do you do?" She smiled brightly at me.

Disconcerted, I answered, "Fine, ma'am, and you?"

"Just fine thank you," she answered automatically, then looking at me keenly, "Have you ever modeled?"

I looked at her perplexed, not being familiar with the term. It was not bandied about at all often in the thirties.

"You *know* - a mannequin. Have you ever been a department store mannequin?"

I shook my head dumbly. I had a vague idea what was involved with being a mannequin and it just occurred to me that she might actually be offering me a job.

“Well, we are looking to hire two new girls for our daywear department, and you are exactly the right size and shape.” I blushed at this. Being small-chested was more acceptable then than now, but still I was fifteen and anyone mentioning my ‘shape’ was enough to make me blush.

“What would I have to do?” I stammered.

She smiled encouragingly at me, “Why don’t you come to my department? It’s quiet right now and I’ll explain the position and the wages.

I ran home after my first grown up meeting bursting with the news.

Mom was thrilled. I would work at Magnin two nights after school and on Saturday and for my trouble I would get a 10% discount off any purchases I made and I would be paid 25 cents an hour, plus I’d get all my hosiery for free. With all my riches I could begin taking dance classes down at the Ambassador Hotel. Some girlfriends and I had taken lessons after school from my Homeroom teacher and I’d loved it. I had visions of becoming a real dancer in a Busby Berkeley musical. If my dream was going to come true knowing the fox trot and the Charleston were not going to be enough.

“Abby, there is one birthday gift for you I’ve kept a long time for you. Now that you are sixteen you are eligible for The Daddy Gross scholarship fund.” Mutti’s eyes twinkled as she shared this information. We sat on the fake white sand poolside at The Ambassador

Hotel. I'd just finished my dance lesson at the Cocoanut Grove night club. My mother met me for a birthday swim before dinner.

I brushed the sand off her legs and I sat up to hear what she had to say "Papa left me a scholarship in his name?" my voice was incredulous.

Mutti smirked at her own joke, "No, but had he not been such a bastard, I'm certain he would have. So, I set this aside for you to go on a trip. There's enough here to take you anywhere for a short time when you are sweet sixteen," she looked steadily at me, "Tomorrow."

"Why?" I questioned, confused, but delighted.

"I want you to see something of the world, not fall in love with the first character you meet and be forced into an unhappy marriage." She spoke from experience.

"Maybe I *will* fall in love on my trip," I replied, my thoughts racing to through the exotic locales where I could meet brooding strangers with sexy hooded eyes. Film star Ramone Navarro was my current crush.

"Maybe, but I would like you to travel a bit before thinking about love."

"You deserve a trip too, a chance to get away by yourself." I replied.

"The last thing I ever want is to be by myself," her eyes blinked. We hadn't reached the point where we could casually refer to Henry yet. That was still a long way off. I moved to hug her.

"Thank you Mutti. I love you." I murmured against her hair. We hugged for a long time. She was so good, my father was so bad. The only decent thing he managed was dying in a timely fashion.

The next morning - my actual birthday - I awoke to discover my Edward Gross scholarship fund tucked beneath my pillow. I bounded out of bed crunching the bills in my hand. Mama had obviously gone to the bank to get the newest bills they could find, because these were stiffer than a nun's britches. I ran into her room and leapt onto her bed.

"Mama wake up, mama you darling thing. Look what Papa's ghost left me!"

Heavy lidded, she looked up at her wild girl looming on her bed.

"Get up quick; let me take you to breakfast with my windfall." I demanded.

She shook herself awake. "No. This is not to be frittered away on breakfast with me." Sliding out of bed she grabbed my arm and pulled me down on her coverlet.

Enfolding me in a hug, she whispered, "Be bold, Abigail."

I giggled at the word. "Now that's one thing a girl's not supposed to be."

"I don't mean cheap, love, never cheap, bold." She moved away from me to get her robe. She wrapped her creamy satin nightgown in a silk robe. Mama began wearing the most extravagant nightgowns and penoir sets about the time she began her escort service. Laundry did not cover all of our expenses. Through cleaning the sheets of a wealthy director, she discovered a quicker way to affluence. I have it on the highest authority prostitution does not mean immediate damnation. More's the pity - I would love to see my mother again, although perhaps not sizzling in eternal Hellfire. Then again I'm certainly not sizzling. If anything I'm always cold.

The nighty she wore was a copy of a design by Vionnet, cut all on the bias; she just pulled it down over her head like a slippery handkerchief. The neckline was circled

with petals which was too divine. When Mama moved she sounded like a gentle breeze. She led me into the kitchenette and lit the burner beneath the kettle. Filching her cigarettes and ashtray from the top of the fridge she sat down at the arborite table and with a flick of her wrist opened her silver lighter. She paused over lighting her cigarette, inhaled her first cigarette of the day deeply and asked,

“So where to little one? New York, Chicago, Los Angeles? What will you do for your big adventure?

“Death Valley.” I replied without consideration.

“Death Valley?” She looked at me strangely. As well she should, what an embarrassing lack of imagination on my part. Still without Death Valley, I should have remained just little Abigail Gross, the pretty whore’s daughter.

Chapter Three

“How are you going to get there?” Mutti asked.

“I thought I’d rent something grand, bold perhaps.” I widened my eyes and grinned.

Death Valley did not spell fun to most sixteen-year-olds, especially not in 1933. But then I was always on the cutting edge. It seemed romantic and larger than life to a city girl like me - a wide carved rough land of saltwater flats and alien moon landscapes. Death Valley had just been designated a National Monument in April. This meant in a few months President Roosevelt was going to send in his newly formed Civilian Conservation Corps to build 343 miles of new roads as part of his New Deal works projects – but not before I got there. I would still need to figure out the best way to get there over meandering desert roads. People did it all the time, still it made Mutti nervous.

She tapped her cigarette into the tray. I got up to refill out coffee cups.

“Travelling by yourself...” She was skeptical. “There must be some Hoovervilles out that way.”

I shrugged, I didn’t care. I was sixteen, which translates to fearless in at least seven languages. During the dark days of the depression - the ones we were living through remarkably well - mainly because of Mutti’s new line of work which seemed to be depression-proof - camps of homeless people sprang up on the outskirts of lots of cities. It didn’t seem that Death Valley would be the most hospitable place for the

homeless to set up – at ground level the salt flats in the summer could exceed 200 degrees Fahrenheit

“Maybe if you took a bus?” Mutti suggested. She ran her hands over the soft folds of satin in her lap.

I shook my head, “That doesn’t seem too bold or adventurous at all.” I protested.

“Well, look into it.” She blew the steam from her coffee. “I suppose you will stay at the Furnace Creek Inn.”

I nodded. The Furnace Creek Inn was really the only place to stay in Death Valley in 1933. It was a snazzy resort that was getting some press. That old cat Hedda Hopper had mentioned it many times in her column. Unsophisticated whelp that I was I believed everything Hedda wrote in her column. I would for years till I became the victim of it.

Known as the Hollywood Hatchet, Hedda Hopper, whose real name was Elda Furry, was one of the most feared people in Hollywood. A gossip columnist and former starlet, she had a weekly column filled with the doings and don’tings (especially the don’tings) of everyone who mattered and a few who were expendable in the film world. She dished rumor, innuendo, and unfounded lies, pulverizing grammar along the way. She had a huge reservoir of background dish with which she avenged herself on anyone who displeased her. Imagine today’s *Page Six* with the authority of the Washington Post during Watergate. Awesome power, appalling judgment. If Hedda said the stars were glittering in Death Valley, I knew they would damn well be glittering.

In my mind's eye I saw myself as a very daring bright, young thing off on a madcap adventure mingling with stars and wild creatures. So naturally my first plan of action was choosing my wardrobe.

Slipping the crisp bills into my powder blue pocket book I set off for Madame Sofia's house at Mama's suggestion. Madame Sofia was Mama's nightclothes connection. One must dress for life's great adventures.

Sofia lived in one of the fairy-cottages pocketed three miles from the ocean in Carmel. Tucked amid plush greenery and flowering bushes, it looked like the backdrop of some tepid romance novel, complete with white painted arbor and rustic, wooden swing. Being careful not to step on any errant garden sprites that no doubt hid in the blooms, I made my way across the paving stones to her hyacinth-colored door. I knocked rapidly in my excitement. She opened the door immediately.

"Come in Abigail, *drágám!* I've set a few things out you will look divine in."

Sophia's consignment shop in her basement was Carmel's best kept secret. A former silent screen actress, she became one of the casualties of the "Talkies" thanks to her heavy Hungarian accent. Smarter than most of her contemporaries, Sophia knew her career was over well before Jack Warner did. Thinking ahead she cut a deal with a woman in the Warner Brother's wardrobe department to buy the used movie clothes for a small price and resell them in Carmel. Warner's had no tracking system for its costumes back then so much of the stuff Sophia carried were 'lost 'goods. Their loss was my gain. For a fraction of the price I dressed in glorious designer knock-offs created by some of Hollywood's best seamstresses.

I had called ahead and told Sophia of my plans. She laid out her latest ‘steals,’ an apricot wool suit with a fetching beret that set off my fair skin as prettily as Magnin’s walls. It was through Sophia I refined my sense of style. I’d been learning bits and pieces from the customers I modeled for. But Sophia was different. She didn’t view clothes the way a forty-year-old matron from Pasadena would. She judged what I wore with a filmmaker’s eye. Clean lines, just like I. Magnins. No frills.

“No *affektálás dragam*,” she would bellow should my hand caress an unnecessary ruffle with desire. Because I was long and lean, the day clothes she chose for me were mannish in styling, sporty. 1920’s rather than ’30s style. After the First World War, women’s fashion evolved toward what was known in France as the *Garconne* Look. Women wore clothes that hung from shoulders and hips without any pretence of a waist. Their dress lengths were gradually shortened to reach just below the knees when standing. When they sat, well, that was shocking – almost a whole length of gam could be revealed.

At the beginning of the thirties, hemlines dropped to the ankle and remained there till the war. Since my legs are my star attraction, Sophia worked around this by stocking my suitcase with lots of tennis skirts. She told me to pack my racket to justify my exhibitionism. Necklines were my nemesis. They were lowered while torsos were molded beneath squared shoulders. I have no breasts to speak of. And in the thirties busts were a-blooming. Dress bodices were designed with inset pieces and yokes. Necklines were scallop-edged or ruffled, pleated or otherwise plumped. They hung on my

adolescent chest. I was born a decade too late for fashion. I would have made a fabulous flapper. No breast binding necessary for this girl.

Sophia dressed me from the inside out. To help me out in the bosom department, I purchased my first bra. Underpinnings of the early thirties continued to include the body armor known as the corset – happily bone-free by then. Corsets were brassieres and girdles with garters combined. By the late thirties, the separate bra and girdle had become acceptable. Thanks to my insider status with Sophia, my undergarments were the latest and the puffiest and the separatist, though it was only 1933.

Sophia was completely approving of women's sportswear during this period. She loaded me up with some beautiful pieces: sport suits; a soft caramel leather jacket cut slimly around my waist; and three pairs of draping trousers. I felt so daring. I'd seen slacks on Kate Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich of course, but they weren't acceptable daywear for regular folk. It was still considered cross-dressing. Sophia convinced me to try them on. I felt naughty and quite sexy. I bought everything she suggested, including shoes and a funny-looking handbag made of leather rather than beads or mesh. It was a three pocket clutch with a large flap over the front. She gave me the name of a local artisan who would emboss my initials on the front. *Trés raffinee, drágám!*

By the time I left Sophia's, my upcoming trip seemed superfluous. I had just spent three hours in a fantasy world. I drove back from Carmel in a mist, clothes-drunk and delighted with myself. I pulled into our apartment parking lot to discover some show-off had parked his shiny yellow Ford Model A cabriolet in our spot. Feeling self-important and grown-up – I'd just purchased 'slacks' after all - I parked directly behind the car and

hopped out. I looked inside the car for any indication of who the joker was. The caramel, leather interior was the same shade as my newly-purchased leather jacket. It was beautiful, so supple. This car was not made for a man, not really, it was too pretty. It was meant to be driven by a self-possessed girl in a beret, a trouser-wearing girl of independent means. Me, dammit. I was meant to drive a car like that. I took a quick glance behind me.

It was mid-afternoon. Nobody was around. I felt a pang of desire so strong it remained unequalled till I met the love of my life. I opened the driver's seat and slipped across the upholstery. It was a 1931, but like brand new. My fingers played over the carved wooden steering wheel. I pretended I was crossing the Mojave Desert in this sunshine chariot.

"Abigail!" My mother's call pulled my out of my reverie.

I looked up guilty, but defiant. "Some wise guy parked in our spot, Mutti." Stating the obvious is rarely a good strategy for distraction. I hopped out of the car fast.

"Language, Abigail! Don't be disrespectful."

I looked around for the object of my disrespect, puzzled. I turned back to look at Mama. She obviously had dinner plans. Her low-cut dress was fashionably festooned with shimmering beads. I smiled at how pretty she looked.

"Mutti, you're too nice, let's block him in," I replied. Remember I was feeling very powerful, clothing does make the woman.

"The him is a her and the her is me, or you, really. I rented this for you, my love, to drive across the desert. What do you think? Too flashy?"

I gulped back my excitement, “Oh Mutti, yes, yes indeed, way too flashy!” I laughed. “It’s too flashy for anyone else, but it belongs to me. It’s beautiful, it’s summer in the desert,” I was reaching for words, angling for poetry. “Thank you so much, I adore it.” If I hadn’t towered over her, I would have leapt into her arms.

“Wait a minute,” I looked at her curiously, “I thought you wanted me to investigate the bus.”

She smiled. “Well, I investigated a bus and a car for you, since you seemed to prioritize like a sixteen-year-old and put clothing before transportation,” she glanced at my packages in the back of the car. “You could take a Tanner Tour car with a friend from downtown straight to the Inn for \$64.50 each round trip. So alone it would be over one hundred dollars.”

I shrugged.

“You could take that and it would still leave you with over three hundred,” she glanced again at my packages. “Well, under three hundred dollars to stay at the Inn. So then I went to see the bus, very cheap but,” she pinched her face in a grimace, “Very pedestrian, darling, not very bold at all. So here is your grand transportation. It is in excellent condition, one of my friends had his mechanic look it over for me.”

Her face grew more serious, “Now I want you to plan this car ride carefully. It is eight hundred miles from Los Angeles to the Inn. Two hundred of that is in Death Valley. And it’s the summer. You’ll need to wear a broad brimmed hat to protect you skin and plenty of water.”

“Oh no,” I exclaimed. “I just bought this darling little beret. It’s too beautiful and I just look a picture in it.”

She rolled her eyes, “Wear it when you arrive. It’s one thing to be bold, but trust me there is nothing glamorous about arriving at the Furnace Creek Inn burnt to a crisp and gasping for water.”

I nodded in agreement and looked at my dazzling car. It was even more beautiful than my apricot suit. Life was wonderful.

Shortly before I died I watched a made-for-T.V. movie on the life of William Powell. Normally I loathed television. The idea of people sitting around a plastic box night after night watching shadows live rather than living themselves, depressed me. However Bill had been my particular friend and by the end of my life I was mostly immobile, so I was a captive audience. Interesting – at least for me - was a section of the show devoted to my ‘discovery’ in Death Valley. The show was atrocious, but it did sum up the beginning of my climb quite neatly. Unfortunately the woman playing me was chinless. I have a terrific chin and therefore think badly of those without. With the advances made in plastic surgery; you’d think the actress’s agent would have suggested slicing a bit off her bazoom and attaching it to her jaw line.

The flashback scene in the movie is particularly moronic. One character is an out of work actor sitting on a barstool talking to the other character, a journalist, about the famous Sunny Marcus, the dialogue is awful, but to the information is about as true as

anything ever is. An unkempt character actor playing an unkempt character actor named William looks up at the narrator of the story a perky actress playing girl-reporter. From his worn barstool he gestures to the seat beside him. He takes a long, contemplative haul on his cigarette (his career is dead so he's sucking drama from every moment).

"The first time I saw Sunny," he smiles sardonically, no doubt realizing how many times those words had been spoken by many different people, "was at San Simeon, you know, the Hearst mansion. She was long, lanky and lovely."

He speaks like a movie detective in a forties flick, "She walked in to the foyer wearing khakis like crepe. Her blond streak kind of glinted in the sun. That was the strangest thing that blond streak. The rest of her hair was shiny light brown, but in the front she had this one gold hank of hair. Remember in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* – Audrey Hepburn had that skunk stripe in her hair? That was a reference to Sunny. All the women thought she bleached it just to stand out, but back then she just stood out anyway."

Marta, my maid who was watching it with me, and I snorted in unison. I ordered her to get up and make us some more martinis. I had no desire to view my life sober, after all I hadn't lived it that way.

"How'd she get there? A 19-year-old from Wilshire Blvd. with no apparent connections and no starlet aspirations stays at the Hearst mansion for the weekend?" Girl-reporter interjects, doing her damndest to register an intelligent glint in her eye.

Insightful girl-reporter then has a voice over. "One thing I'd learned about interviewing people nobody tells the same story as anybody else and nobody tells the same story twice – unless it's a lie."

“Bill Powell, I guess. They met at a hotel in Death Valley. No romance, just pals. Anyway Bill was the one who first called her Sunny. This was in the early thirties. Bill was huge. He’d been married to Carole Lombard, was engaged to Jean Harlow and had just begun the *Thin Man* Series with Myrna Loy. He was one of Hollywood’s leading men. Slim met him one day at their hotel. They started talking and remained buddies forever. Men just loved her, both as a woman and a friend. She was easy to be with and soft on the eyes,” unkempt man talking again.

“So she was pretty sophisticated even then.”

Man laughs. “Yeah, Sunny was sophisticated. But not in that fake uppity way so many actresses were aping back then. More in the smooth way, like good Italian leather. She had the right answer for everyone. She didn’t blush, lose her cool, nothing fazed her. You know that old joke?”

Girl-reporter shakes her head and signals to the bartender for another round.

“The definition of sophistication: a guy walks in on his wife and her lover making love in his bed and he says to the lover, ‘Oh pardon me, feel free to continue.’”

Girl-reporter says “That’s the definition of sophistication.”

“No, the lover replies ‘Thank you I will,’ and he does. That’s the definition of sophistication.”

Girl laughs appreciatively. Man laughs appreciating being appreciated.

“That was Sunny. She’d continue, and then ask you to light her cigarette after.”

Marta and I looked at each other and dissolved into laughter. She switched off the television, and then carried over the pitcher and glasses.

“To think, Cecily spent a fortune on therapy trying to capture my essence. She simply needed cable.” I shook my head. Sipping the drink I nodded, “Good job.”

Marta smiled her thank you. “I wonder what they’ll say about Truman, he’s at least twice as famous.”

“Then they’ll make him out to be twice the shit.” I raised my glass for a refill. “Which, when you think about it, is only fair.”

My adventure began when I arrived at the Furnace Creek Inn, ‘a golden vision,’ as the actor William Powell later put it - driving up in my glamorous yoke of a car.

The car ride was treacherous. At first I loved every minute of it, every second I drove I felt lighter and more powerful, like I was a Goddess just awakening to her powers. On my journey, I discovered my lifelong passion: motion. It sounds corny but I liked the rush of the wind, the control of the direction, the anticipation of going without the responsibility of arriving. Most people, certainly Christian my second husband, and Hemingway, even occasionally Tru attributed it to fear of boredom. So much for those supposed empaths. My love of motion, be it in conversation, travel or party-hopping had more to do with optimism - the certain knowledge that there was something extraordinary around the corner.

I made it out of L.A. fairly well, got turned around a couple of times near Johannesburg but eventually found my way to RT. 190. Luckily I got a flat *before* I hit 190. There were still plenty of kind gentlemanly gentlemen to help me, after 190 I would have been lost for sure. California has more mountain ranges than you can shake a slimy,

possibly poisonous snake at. I had no idea. All of them seemed deserted. There's the Coso range, the Argus range, the Slate range, the Panamint range, the mind reels. Then I neared the Valley. I guess I pictured big sky and glorious scenery. I hadn't really counted on the heat. Remember there were no air conditioners in '33. My lovely yoke of a car was feeling more like a fried egg. The last bit of the journey I must have finished off two gallons of water and all I wanted to do was pee. Too shy to stop at the side of the road I kept on going straight through to the Furnace Creek Inn. I stopped a few minutes before pulling into the Inn to fix my hair and fashion my pert little beret on top of my head. I flung my broad-brimmed hat in the backseat and checked myself in my compact. I looked lovely. That's the best part of being young, the effortlessness of beauty. One can be older and beautiful, but never with the same insouciance.

Bill Powell sidled up to the passenger side door of my car, "Hey sunny princess, that's some fancy omelet you're driving."

I sighed, "Isn't she extraordinary?" looking over my dusty chariot.

"Yes, *she* certainly is." Powell responded looking me right in the eye.

I had to pee really badly. "Mr. Powell your dialogue needs work," my cockiness was purely bladder-inspired, "My bags are in the back, sir, if you don't mind." I smiled wide.

Bill looked mildly astonished at my cheek, after all this man was not just a matinee idol, he was also two decades my senior. Still, he did as I asked - a useful lesson for a girl like me. I was desperate for the ladies room. So I swept up quickly to the front

desk at Furnace Creek Inn with William Powell as my bell hop. I left him with my bags as I asked for directions to the powder room to freshen up. I didn't even look back at him. Relief, as they say, is only a tinkle away.

Well Hedda was right, I thought, as I washed my hands. The stars are here. I took a long time washing my hands, because now that my immediate needs were taken care of I felt a little shy.

Chapter Four

What Hedda's column failed to mention, amid the breathless account of scenic splendor was that most of the guests were the staid, middle-aged back-office movie people. The inn was a basic resort hotel on the east side of the desert. Very well run, pleasant, smallish. There were no other restaurants, no nightclubs, nothing but a big stone hotel – in other words next-door-to-dreary. I guess I caused quite a stir, this wind-blown kid registering with the aplomb of a celebrated *mondaine*.

In the washroom I looked at myself in the mirror and pasted on a big smile. Now that I had made such an entrance I didn't want to mess it up. But I also couldn't sleep in the ladies room for the entire stay.

My mother's social edict echoed in my brain. "Smile, darling, always smile. Whether you know the person or not, whether you speak or not, even if people think you a dimwit, at least you'll seem a friendly one." So smile I did. I walked toward the stone front desk. It was not nearly as elegant or intimidating as the Biltmore front desk where I had spent many moments waiting for mother to complete her business. Mr. Powell was still there holding my carpet valise. I tried to take it. He resisted.

"A good bellhop always finishes the job. This is nothing if not a respectable establishment." He paused, looked me over from stem to stern, and then said pertly, "At least it was. . ."

"As evidenced by your attendance, Mr. Powell, I have no doubt it still is, and as I am a respectable girl, I shall take it from here." I deftly grabbed my bag from him. I took

his now free hand in a firm handshake and said, “Thanks very much for the assistance; I suspect the real bellhop can carry it.” With that I smiled brightly at the desk clerk, who was a bemused-looking elderly gentleman and proceeded to register. Not looking up, I sensed rather than saw Mr. Powell retreat. The real bellhop, not nearly as debonair, but very handsome, escorted me to my room.

My room was masculine but cozy. The Mission styling of the double bed, dark wood armoire and a Stickley-esque chair were relieved by the most marvelous green quilts and cushions.

I can see it so clearly. Look at that green, why I never really noticed it at the time. It isn't just green really, it's tilting green. Have you ever seen tilting green? I have many times when I was in England. Once I went down to Sheltington Hall in Bath to see the tilting green and I've never seen anything quite so spectacular in my life. I don't know how long a tilting green is, about half a mile I guess, but it's the most beautiful grass you'll ever see. There are great banks that rise up on either side like a giant's staircase terraced in grass, grass, grass. They set tents heaving with tassels and gold-braiding – imagine trouveres and troubadours strolling the grounds and mystical ladies arranged in front to watch their knights and proud horses shrouded in banners. Oh my, tilting green – powerful stuff. Let's just stay here for awhile and admire the color. Oh I am so thirsty for color I could just die if I wasn't already dead. How dreadful white is, awful pasty nothingness.

I quickly unpacked then gleefully washed off the desert dust. It was good to feel clean again. Wrapped in a thick white towel I sat on the bed and looked out my bedroom window. I overlooked the long rectangular pool. The pool seemed like it had been cut into rock, it curved gently at the corners and was attended by several loungers. A one-story stone bathhouse ran the length of the pool and behind it the savage architecture of the dessert rose in a craggy peak. The few trees around the pool were spiked and scratchy. I slipped off my towel and slid under the quilt of my bed. Overwhelmed, I wondered what the hell I was doing here anyway. My independent, sophisticated self seemed to have deserted me. I burrowed further beneath the sheets. They were very soft and very white. I wondered whether they'd stone washed them to soften them like Mutti used to. Lord knows they seemed to have enough stones around here.

Why was I here? What did I plan on doing with myself this far out in the middle of nowhere? It all seemed like a grand adventure till I stopped. I think that's why motion works best for me, introspection isn't really my talent. The real attraction to Death Valley was that it seemed to hint of great things. I can't explain it, but it was the beginning of something. Nowadays you'd call it the Tipping point. But back then there was no language for what I knew instinctively. Sure enough in the thirties Death Valley got to be very big. Shortly after I went there was a hugely popular radio show called Death Valley Days, the Saturday Evening Post did a series on the monument. Magazines and books referred to its merciless beauty. Its open spaces and harsh climate beguiled the western adventurer as the last frontier of the Wild West. And I guess that's what I was looking for, excitement. But not the kind of pedestrian excitement I found at the Cocoanut Club

on Friday nights when local boys would try to dance with me - excitement on a grander, more impressive scale.

One thing was certain, the only excitement I was going to find alone between the sheets was the kind I could go blind enjoying, so I popped out of bed and changed into my tennis whites. Grabbing my racket, I headed out to explore my new digs. It wasn't that big of a place, I soon ran into Bill stretched out by the pool with a familiar-looking stocky, dark-haired man.

"Hey Sunny princess come on over here," Bill called. "The courts are over on the other side."

"Hmm?" I must have looked confused.

"The tennis courts, you know, those things they build to accessorize that racket you're carrying."

I hooted with laughter. Bill had my number. I was no femme-fatale and certainly no tennis pro and he knew it, apparently his friend did too because he asked very familiarly,

"Why aren't you in school, Sunny?"

"Shouldn't you boys be working instead of heckling school girls?" I retorted.

They laughed appreciatively and they both stood up while Bill introduced me to his friend and fellow movie actor Warner Baxter. That was why he looked familiar, he was the Cisco Kid from *In Old Arizona* a few years back. Now he sported a rakish moustache and looked decidedly more debonair, even in swimming trunks. Oh and the way he was looking at me – like I was water in the desert – my, oh my.

Warner asked if I actually played, when I shook my head sheepishly, he offered to teach me which I immediately accepted. After all it gave me a great excuse to show off my legs in more of Sophia's outfits. Things were definitely getting interesting now.

Bill had come to the inn with Warner Baxter for some rest and relaxation between pictures. I suspected he and Warner were desperate for diversion. Later, Warner told me the real reason for their stay. Bill's marriage to Carole Lombard was ending and Bill was very sad. Unlike many a handsome Hollywood actor, he didn't feel like drowning his sorrows in the company of starlets or in the bottom of a bottle. He was too decent of a guy for that. He just wanted to figure out what went wrong, and back-of-the-moon dreary like the quiet Furnace Creek Inn was just what he desired to review his lost marriage. I felt extremely flattered and grown-up that Warner had confided in me like that.

Warner, an outgoing, enthusiastic friend saw me as a perfect distraction for his friend. I was in no danger of being seduced by either of them, I surmised. I was too young and obviously innocent. They seemed to look on me like slightly kooky old uncles. My timing was impeccable – story of my life. I understood the full magnitude of their stardom, I guess some girls would have either pretended not to know them or been mute and star stuck. I was neither and this delighted them.

They invited me for dinner. I told them I wasn't allowed in the bar as I was under eighteen; drinks would have to be sent to the table. This thrilled them, and they promised to make sure my young lips did not get contaminated with even a thimble-full of anything stronger than soda. Their plan was to drink the place dry so I wouldn't be tempted. They were true to their word. The first few nights, I, with the help of the cute bellhop, saw that

they got to bed safely. This strategy served a purpose, it did keep me out of trouble. I had to have my wits about me to ensure they go taken care of. That is until a flirtation between the bellhop and I developed.

Their drinking wasn't the result of any sad sack feeling on Bill's part, or on Warner's for that matter, but I suspected, just what they did. Lucky for me there were no other pretty, young things staying at the Inn. In fact, as far as feminine scenery, I was it. They lunched with me, dined with me, shared an opinion on any scheme I came up with. Warner and I would often play tennis in the mornings while Bill was sleeping in. He was very open with me, telling me about the craziness of Hollywood and his desires to be respected for his craft.

"You're elbow's too far out."

I adjusted my elbow.

"That's better. Now bend your legs more, bounce like you're ready for anything."

"I'm ready for anything, Mr. Baxter." As well as getting better at tennis I was practicing my flirting. Who better to learn with than a movie star?

He grinned and bounced the ball on the court, preparing to serve. "I'll be the judge of that, Sunshine."

"Yes sir, that's what I was counting on."

He tossed and served into the net.

"Bit rattled Mr. Baxter?" I laughed coyly. I can't remember now which actress I was aping, probably Katharine Hepburn. *Morning Glory* had just come out and I thought she was wonderful, an arch combination of provocative chastity. Still searching for my

personality and it seemed just as easy to borrow one as try to create one on my own. At least I knew what I liked and didn't. I always preferred the tough-talking dames to the simpering ingénues and good girls. You could keep Mary Pickford and Jeanette Mc Donald, I preferred a girl with a little sass and class. Plus I was in Death Valley, I could try out a bunch of different personalities. It was not like I would ever see anyone from here again, or so I thought.

"Yes I am. I am rattled and distracted by a pretty, little girl with big eyes and long, lovely legs. What do you say we call it quits and have a drink?"

"It's 10:00 a.m. Mr. Baxter and I'm a minor." I demurred, secretly thrilled at the invitation. He looked very dashing in his tennis whites, even for a forty-two year old man. He wore a V-neck cabled vest over a collared T-shirt and his legs were muscular and tanned. More technically handsome than William Powell, his heavy-browed dark-eyed look would work for both gangster and leading man as far as I was concerned and today I was happy to have him be my leading man.

"I guess that means we'll have to drink my stash instead. Let's go back to my room, I have a nice view and we can relax."

I smiled, not trusting my voice and scooped my balls off the ground. He leapt over the net and escorted me to his hotel room. It seemed like a very long walk. His hand was light on the small of my back. I wanted to look up at him but couldn't bring myself to. Were warning sounds rushing in my ears? Yes of course, but it was like so much white noise and while virginal – I wasn't exactly innocent. Plus this was Warner Baxter. The man had been in a zillion films, had probably been with a zillion starlets which

added to his attraction for me rather than detracting from it. I certainly didn't want my first foray into romance to be with a fumbling, pimply bellhop.

Bill, in case you are wondering, was still in bed himself at this moment. Bill had arranged with the front desk to be woken with fresh coffee, strawberries and Devonshire clotted cream every morning at 10:00. He'd read the New York Times till 12:00 – he wouldn't trust a Hearst paper for love nor money he said. Eventually he would amble out to meet us for lunch at 1:00 by the pool. Warner would tease him that he didn't really need a wife at all, he just needed an excellent chambermaid and afternoon companions to make his life complete.

I wasn't really clear on Warner's romantic life at that point and I didn't really care. I could blame this disregard on my youth, but it's actually a point of character. When I am romantically interested in someone they could be single or married with a passel of ten brats, it makes no difference to me. I do however draw the line at husband stealing – I've never thought any man was worth breaking up a marriage for. Wesley's marriage didn't count, but you'll see that later. Better to just take your fun where you can get it and leave them at the end a little older and winded.

Warner's door was unlocked. We walked in and I nervously made straight for the balcony. I wasn't sure what exactly was going to happen, if anything, but I wasn't going to make it too easy.

"Vodka and soda?" He popped his head out of the closet he was crouching in.

"Sure," I nodded tugging on the door that opened to the balcony.

“Oh I locked it,” he said. “Keeps out cat burglars and needy starlets who are always throwing themselves at me.”

“The cat burglars or the starlets?”

“The cat burglars,” he grinned. “It’s too hot to sit outside anyway.” He handed me my drink. He gestured to a bed.

His room was substantially bigger than mine. It was decorated in the gold and beige tones of the desert. Two large double beds jutted out from the left wall and a round table sat in the far right corner with two side chairs. It was remarkably tidy. Mr. Baxter was obviously not a guy who left his dirty socks for the maid to clean up. I commented on this as I sat at the table. He came over to join me.

“Well I used to leave my crap everywhere until one day I realized as I was packing up that half my stuff was missing. I tracked down a chambermaid to ask her about it and found out that the maid that cleaned my room was helping herself to my personal effects and selling them for a profit to anyone with cash,” I laughed.

“Well, times are hard out there. There are probably people in a Hooverville who could eat for a week thanks to one of your socks.”

He leaned toward me. “Well I hope they washed it first.”

I giggled and he took my hand and softly began to massage it. “You have beautiful skin,” he said.

I gulped some of my drink. “Thank you,” I replied. My face felt warm. His breath smelled kind of nice, a masculine combination of cigarettes and soda.

“Have you ever thought about being an actress? You would probably test beautifully, like Garbo. It’s all about the skin.” His hand that held my hand was now stroking my forearm.

“I don’t know anything about acting Mr. Baxter.”

“Warner, please. Call me Warner, after all we’re both adults and you are in my bedroom” he replied. He did have a point. “You don’t need to know anything about it. You just need to look good and be sweet. And you look good and sure seem sweet. Are you sweet, Sunny-girl?” His voice was mellow and smooth. He gently kissed my temple. Standing and bending slightly he removed my drink from my hand then cradled my face in both his hands. His hands were so sure and deliberate I gave myself over to them. He pulled me up from the chair and folded my arms around his neck. Kissing me, he stroked my waist through my scant cotton T-shirt. I couldn’t believe what was happening but it felt wonderful. I’d never been kissed like this before. There was no urgency or panic, just a lovely languid enjoyment of two bodies together.

He moved his mouth away from my and began kissing my neck, “I could get you into pictures,” he whispered.

“Mmm,” I nodded. His moustache was tickling my neck. At sixteen, a career was not my priority.

He led me over to his bed.

I had a hard time imagining Bill Powell and Carole Lombard divorcing. She was so lovely and seemed so much fun in the movies and he was so dashing and kind it didn’t

seem to make any sense. Money obviously wasn't a point of contention as it was for so many couple now trying to make ends meet in spite of breadlines and lost jobs. They lived a charmed life of beauty, wealth and adulation, why would they split? One morning after Warner and I had made love I asked him why they were breaking up. He ignored my question at first. He was admiring my legs

"Nice gams," he smiled stroking my hip.

"I've always thought so," I replied and snuggled closer to him. Sex was, I discovered wonderful, simply wonderful. Warner was a terrific lover, looking back on it now I can't believe my luck. For many women their first time is at best disappointing and at worst dreadful. Not so for me. Warner was so sensual and so slow that my first second and third times – all that morning - were sensational. The best part of all, well maybe not the best, but one of the added elements was we had someone to hide it from. Thanks to Bill's generous sleep schedule we were able to keep him completely in the dark to our morning 'games.'

"It's a shame," he said mysteriously.

"What's a shame?" I replied, playing his game.

"Nothing."

"Don't be coy, that's the woman's job." As you can probably tell my direct dialogue was heavily influenced by my movie idol Mae West this particular morning.

"It's a shame you're so young."

I looked up at him, his handsome face smiling rakishly, "Is that what Mr. Powell thinks?"

“Mr. Powell’s got his hands full with that lippy blond. He doesn’t need the complication.”

I nodded knowingly. I thought lippy was a bit of a stretch when referring to the gorgeous gag girl Carole Lombard.

“What happened there?” I repeated my question, still wanting to know.

Warner shrugged, “They are different. She is out there, you know, always wants to go to clubs, dance, meet new people. She’s still pretty young and Bill want’s a wife. It’s not that he wants her to stop working or anything. He just doesn’t really live that kind of Hollywood life anymore. He’d prefer to go home at the end of the day put his feet up, have a drink with his beautiful wife, read the paper and have dinner, maybe even a few kids down the road. She’s not ready to ‘give up,’ as she calls it, and sit around all the time doing nothing.”

I sided with her in my mind. The world was a wide open place. She had the money and the clout to go anywhere she wanted. She was right to do it now when she was young and strong and pretty. I decided to change the subject.

“And you, Mr. Baxter,” I did my best Mae West impersonation, “do you need complications?”

He just chuckled, “You outta be in pictures kid, you do that pretty well, and you’re way better looking.”

“So you keep telling me,” I raised an eyebrow.

He rolled so he was leaning on one elbow over me, “Why don’t you come back with me and we’ll get you into pictures. You’d be great, hey, let me talk to Bill about it.

Maybe you could be under contract with us.” His mind was spinning now, “And we could subcontract you to the studios. It would be a great trip.” I smiled up at him, flattered, but silent. I really loved the movies, but I wanted to dance not act. Still this seemed like a move in the right direction. But did I really want to be contracted to a man that was my lover. I didn’t even know how I felt about him really. Our lovemaking was such fun, but I didn’t really feel in any danger of falling for him. Maybe before we’d made love there was that possibility, but it was more because of curiosity of the unknown. I hadn’t really thought of us continuing on.

He looked at me strangely, as if he was trying to read my mind, then he lightly dipped down to kiss my forehead, then hopped out of bed.

“Think about it and let me know. I’m going to get washed up. I’m famished.”

Later on that afternoon I had a date. I had continued dating so as not to arouse Bill’s suspicion. I had forgotten to tell Warner about it but didn’t think he would mind. They - at least Bill, Warner pretended - didn’t approve of my picnics with some of the young male staff I’d met while I was there. Bill in particular worried like a mother hen that I would be taken advantage of.

I went on my date with the attractive bellhop. His name was David, I think, very sweet-faced and young. He took me exploring. Having lived at the Inn for two years now he knew the area well. By four in the afternoon, the sun had fallen low enough in the sky to make the jagged hills and mountains glow in variegated beauty. Not too far from the inn was Zabriskie Point. We would drive on an oiled road which terraced the small hill. Here we would stop, fish out the picnic basket, a few bottles of soda and sit gazing at the rows

of deeply folded yellow hills spreading toward the shimmering black mountains. David (I think that was his name) told me that the land forming the hills was actually a lake bed at one time, but a long, long time ago it was lifted and folded by violent earth movements. I didn't care about the technical hows or whys. I just wanted to breathe in the beauty.

I told David about Warner's acting offer, while we sat there on the scratchy wool blanket he'd bought. His eyes were wide. Even though he was three full years older than me at nineteen, he seemed like a kid brother. He treated me with great respect and awe, so much so I wonder if Bill had threatened him with bodily harm should he try to touch me. Mr. Powell, a perfect gentleman, could, when deep in his cups, pretend to be fierce.

He said I would be a perfect movie actress - I was prettier than Mable Normand and funnier than Clara Bow. I kissed him on the cheek and grew quiet on the car ride back. When we returned, Bill and Warner were pacing the foyer. David dashed out of the car to open my door, but Warner beat him to it. He glared at David, then at me.

"Where have you two been?" he slurred slightly, cocktail hour had started promptly at 4:00.

I apologized, explained about my previous engagement and lied about a note I'd not tucked under his door.

"Do you realize she's sixteen? Do you?" Bill spoke in much lower tones than he normally did and stepped toward David. Reflexively David stepped back. Noting David's fear, Bill's expression softened and he patted David on the shoulder.

“She’s a good girl, and since we are the only guardians she has here I don’t think it’s a polite to keep her out when she has other engagements. It’s disrespectful. You don’t mean to be disrespectful do you son?”

David shook his head. Warner clapped him on the back a little harder than hearty. His cheerful humor almost restored now that Bill had just scared the bejesus out of a wait staff.

“Good, well we are just about to partake of some dinner, you two come and join us. We’ll wait while you change.” Warner indicated they would wait at the bar for us.

“I think you should wait in your rooms instead, you’ve done enough waiting at bars,” I scolded.

“Who’s fault is that? We decided you should be the next Bright Young Thing about two hours ago and you weren’t around to be thankful or excited or anything,” Warner pouted and pulled on his moustache. David in the meantime was slinking away.

“Hey where are you goin’?” Bill called after him.

David muttered something about having to work and practically ran up the stairs in the lobby two at a time. Bill and Warner howled with laughter and congratulated themselves on their fierceness.

“Are you two satisfied now?” I said crossly, though my eyes were merry. “He was very nice and after all I’ll need someone to play with after you two leave.” They both bowed by way of apology. They told me to hurry up and change as they were starving. The boys decided to take me to Stove Pipe Wells Hotel, where the only other real restaurant in Death Valley resided. Naturally I drove, but not until I loaded up the car

with plenty of water, figuring, whenever those two nuts sobered they'd be plenty thirsty. The hotel was about 25 miles northwest of us but since I'd just eaten and my friends would pass out soon, I didn't think this would be a problem.

There is as reason sunsets in the desert are rhapsodized about. I've witnessed few things as pretty in my life – and that's saying something considering all the attractive things I've witnessed. The horizon settled into a purply-gold wash so breathtaking that it seemed holy. If the Devil is in the details then God is in the sunsets.

When we arrived at the restaurant I had to wake both drunks. They had sobered somewhat. Warner reintroduced the topic of acting to me. Bill seemed enthusiastic. Naturally film life for both have them had been mostly positive. Warner had a Oscar from playing the 'Cisco Kid,' Bill was about to embark on the extremely successful *Thin Man* series with the wise and witty Myrna Loy – till the day I died they were my most favorite films. I would give anything to see then again now. The Egyptians had completely the wrong idea about the afterlife – there is no reason at all for gold or jewels or even servants, except maybe to talk to. Bring books and videos. The afterlife, at least for me, a girl who enjoyed motion her whole life, is like being trapped in a train station in the midwest with nothing to read and no one to talk to. Hell isn't painful physically, however it is excruciatingly dull.

I told them my idea of being a Busby Berkeley dancer.

"Well, you've got the legs for it, Sunny-girl." Warner was a distance from sober now. Bill gave him a warning look. Then they told me they were leaving the next day. I caught my breath. I hadn't expected them to go so quickly.

Bill explained they had to get back to their respective studios, but they would arrange for a screen test when I returned. Bill asked if I wanted to go back with them. They could arrange for it sooner if I wished. I looked at Warner. He was eyeing a curvy waitress. I shook my head and smiled.

“I want to stay here and finish my adventure. You both are just the first leg of it.”

“There she goes talking about her great legs again,” Warner slurred and patted my thigh.

“Well then call us when you get back and we’ll work something out,” Bill said and rifled through his pocket for a pencil. I reached for my pocketbook and found one to hand to him. He wrote his and Warner’s telephone numbers on a cocktail napkin. How perfect – even at sixteen I recognized the act as trite. Not that he meant it that way. Bill was a very sincere fellow, but even then I could see the symbolism. I had to decide whether or not I was a number on a cocktail napkin kind of girl. I folded the paper square neatly and tucked it in my handbag and didn’t say anything more about my future with them as my guides.

The days following their departure were fairly anti-climactic. One-sided tennis loses its charm. Terrific outfits stop feeling chic if there is no one there to admire them. And while I played at witty dialogue in my head, repeating it to my image in the mirror quickly became tiresome. I’d grab books from the shelves by the fireplace and recite two pages at a time, pretending I was practicing for a movie role. I really missed the attention. Don’t misunderstand; I still had a fair share of attention from David the bellhop and the others at the Inn. But they weren’t sparkly or thrilling like Bill and Warner were.

Celebrities are different. I don't know whether they start out that way or become that way with the attention; I suspect it's the former. I've met people who just vibrate sparkle. I was one of those people. There is a chemical reaction that occurs when people are around them. I knew when they left I wanted to have that feeling again and again, to be around people who generated it. From that moment everything I did was really to that end. Not the most lofty goal I know, but the one that drove me.

Shortly after they left, I was moping about the tennis court when David came to get me. Mr. Tummnel, the Inn manager, wanted to see me. He had an offer for me, something that could perk up the clientele still here, myself included. I guess he felt the loss of celebrity excitement too. He and Bill had talked about how I was to screen test when I returned to L.A. Bill had told him I was a dancer. Mr. Tummnel wanted to start a dancing club and he wanted me to lead it. He had seen me dance with Bill and Warner and could tell I had enough professional training to fill the bill. He thought if I could demonstrate and offer some dance tips to the older clients, they might have a better, more fun-filled stay. I accepted at once. I loved to dance and I missed it after a month. Dancing made me feel sparkly and as long as I didn't have to do it on a stage I loved to show off.

Fridays and Saturdays in the early afternoon I led an afternoon dance workshop for the geriatric and the occasional starlet. Unfortunately no further big stars came to stay. One morning I was at the pool stretching, we all practiced on the patio to the left of the pool. My ankle had been giving me a bit of trouble. For some reason my left ankle was weaker than my right so I had to wrap it with a thick beige bandage before each days practice. I would soak it in the morning with Epsom salts in a small basin, but nothing

really seemed to help that much. It was just a dud. Usually when I was in L.A. taking lessons at the Cocoanut Grove I would ice it but here in the desert ice was scarce and I'd rather save it for the drinks I'd been sneaking. It didn't help that I was quite an athletic dancer. I didn't coast along and let others dance the big stuff.

I loved swing and the sounds of the big bands and jazz, so I taught my students a smooth, but lively style of swing. Most of the middle-aged ones were surprised to discover that swing was more work than the Charleston, but after they'd danced it for awhile they realized how much more enjoyable it was to dance to the smoother beat. My favorite dance was the Lindy Hop, a dance rendition of Charles Lindberg's 1927 flight across the Atlantic. I'd take a partner, usually poor David, who now followed me around with a hopeful expression every hour he was not working. He did become a hell of a dancer. We would face each other and he would toss me in a tornado of solo turns and leaps. We had a riot.

One morning when I was rubbing my left ankle, a pretty woman, about thirtyish came over to me and introduced herself as Amanda. I said hello. She had on a lovely, soft red sweater and I told her so.

"Thank you," she replied. "You do a really nice job here with the guests."

I smiled my thanks, still worrying my calf.

"Sore?" she asked.

I nodded.

She rubbed her hands together really fast for about three minutes, then laid them on my ankle. The heat felt nice, but didn't seem to do much. She repeated this about four times

"Now flex," she advised. I did as she asked and to my amazement my ankle move without pain.

"Thank you very much," I said, "I'm Sunny." I'd started introducing myself that way. Since Bill and Warner began calling me Sunny, everyone at the Inn had followed suit. "Are you going to join us this afternoon for a dance class? Hopefully my ankle will feel this good then – are you some kind of nurse or healer?"

Amanda shook her head negatively. "No I'm a dancer. Actually I head the Christoff Dance Troupe in Los Angeles, a mutual friend of ours told me to look you up while I was here. I'm just here to relax for the week with my fiancé."

Amanda's fiancé turned out to be more of a temporary boyfriend, but our mutual friend was Bill and the Christoff Troupe was world famous. They had dance troupes at every level and for nearly every type of job, be it stage, film, private parties or revues. They even had a well-respected Ballet troupe that traversed the continent yearly. Bill had worked with Amanda on a couple of movies and told her that he and Warner were planning on putting me under contract. She wanted to see me dance this afternoon. They had an opening in their junior troupe which accepts girls from 16 to 19 years old. The troupe would even pay money. I told her I was planning on being here for a few more weeks. She asked if I would be willing to cut it short. I quickly agreed. My mind started spinning. If I went back to L.A. now I could pocket the rest of my money for another trip.

I hadn't had to pay for my room since I began teaching. This left me with enough of a nest egg to find a place of my own potentially. The thought thrilled me.

By the end of that afternoon Amanda had seen me dance the Tango, the one-step, swing, the Charleston – a crowd-pleaser - and a few other dances I can't remember the names of anymore. She decided to hire me. I was so excited. I didn't know how this would affect my film career but if Bill thought it was a good idea then maybe it would enhance it.

A few weeks later I was back in L.A. and heading to Bill's house with Mutti. Bill very kindly asked us to join us for lunch at his home in Beverly Hills. I was thrilled he hadn't forgotten me. I planned to tell him about my new job with Amanda. I really felt like I was living my life now. I had a job where I was actually paid to dance. I had movie star friends. Now all I needed was my own place to live. Though I'd only been a few days back in L.A., my mother's apartment seemed cramped, also, it appeared that her self-imposed rule not to bring her dates home had eased off while I was away.

"I know it's a little intrusive darling, but I'm sure we can work something out. It just makes much more sense financially and as you said before you left, this is not a career that I can plan on doing forever, so I need to start saving now." She smiled sweetly as if her at-home work simply consisted of piles of papers on a desk, rather than strangers with access to our intimate life. I was eager to see Bill's house and even wondered whether we could perhaps be roommates.

Now I don't know if you've ever been on those tours of the movies stars homes in L.A., but let me tell you, to a little girl who was used to no more than 800 square feet of

living space this was the big time. Good golly was I impressed. Unlike many actors of the time Bill really was witty and debonair, just like the Nick Charles character he played to perfection. And his home was *the* movie star home, beginning with an enormous circular driveway leading to Georgian-style pillars and, of course, a massive front door. The interior was all white, with fur carpets everywhere and gilt mirrors littering every wall – a set designer’s dream. Later I would come to see that Bill and Carole Lombard had truly horrid taste. But in ’33, it was my first introduction to style, and his home looked beyond fabulous. I felt the imprint. These luxuries existed and people could have them, I could have them. I decided then and there, these people and this life was what I wanted. Of course how to get them was another matter.

Chapter Five

After two months back in L.A., I noticed something dreadful, or really rather the lack of something dreadful. My menstrual cycle was A.W.O.L. At sixteen I would sometime skip a month here or there but not nearly three months in a row. One can't live with a courtesan and not see the significance in that. I panicked. Dancers become much less graceful carrying around an extra thirty pounds right out front. Not to mention much less hireable. Having a courtesan as a mother had its benefits - she really wasn't in a position to judge to harshly.

Naturally there was the disappointment. "Oh Abigail, no," she said quietly, but with resignation. "Can you marry him?"

I shook my head vehemently. "Absolutely not, he may be already married for all I know."

"What?" She spoke sharply. "Who is this person? You better know who he is or you are in for a bigger heap of trouble than even this, young lady."

I told her everything. I had only been with Warner, but had no intention of marrying him, even if he begged me. I didn't love him. I didn't really even know him. Of the two I felt I knew Bill better. Since I'd been back in L.A., I'd heard neither hide nor hair of Warner though I'm sure Bill had mentioned to him I was back. I didn't really want to resume our relations, no matter how fun our romp had been. It was disappointing from a career stand-point though. I didn't see my screen test being arranged anytime soon.

We sat down on Mutti's bed. She had cancelled her appointments that day. I called in sick to Amanda. No lie there – I did feel nauseous, not from the pregnancy, more from fear. What the hell was I going to do with a baby at nearly seventeen? I lay down beside Mama, my head in the crook of her arm. She stroked my hair and we talked about what she called 'options.' She knew a lady, a relation of Sophia's - the clothes supplier who dealt with situations like mine. There was some risk, but then afterwards it was like it had never happened. I turned to her, stunned. I was convinced at that moment that my mother could fix anything. She couldn't tell me how much it would hurt or how long it would take to recover. She'd never had to do it herself. But she did say if that was what I wanted she would arrange it. I simply nodded and snuggled in closer.

We drove up the highway, then into Carmel. When we got to the little house, not unlike Sophia's, Agnes greeted us at the door in a gray cardigan and trousers. She ushered us inside. Mutti held my shaking hand.

Look how pale I was. I was so young and skinny. My condition was not obvious at all until I took off my clothes and then a very small bump was revealed. Mama looked, if possible, grimmer than I did. I berated myself for being so stupid. I had listened to Mama's self-recriminations in the car. She felt responsible for not preparing me. As a prostitute she had ways of avoiding this situation, ways she could have shared. She should never have let me go alone. She had always seen me as so responsible. But of course I was still a child, how could I know? All these things she kept repeating on our long ride up the coastline. I just stayed quiet and looked at the ocean.

Agnes sat us down in the living room - which seemed ironic given our purpose - and described what she was going to do. The fee was \$50 dollars. She served us sherry. I drank thirstily and she refilled my glass two more times before she told us it was time to begin. She led me to the back of the house. I disrobed in a small bedroom and lay on top of the bed covered in a flannel sheet as instructed. Mama sat beside me stroking my hair. The room was mauve.

“What a pretty room,” she chattered, “And very clean, mercifully everything looks very clean.”

I shivered.

“Are you cold darling? Let me get you a blanket,” she opened the suitcase we had brought with us at Agnes’s instruction. It contained three towels, a change of clothes, thick menstruation pads and a belt and a blanket. She was unfolding the wool blanket as Agnes knocked discreetly on the door. She covered me and let her in.

Agnes carried a four rolled white towels with her. They looked brand new. Jutting out of one of the towels was a shiny metal prong. I gulped nervously. Agnes placed the towels on the bed, pushed my blanket up to my waist and asked me to lift my hips. She arranged a towel beneath then. Agnes was a practicing nurse during the week and fortunately had access to the proper equipment necessary to perform my abortion. The pain was sharp and short-lived. Kind of like someone stabbing your insides - which is of course what was happening. She completed the task in about a half hour.

Wow there was a lot of blood. I had no idea I lost that much blood that day. She placed the two soiled towels in a large paper bag and cleaned me up with the third. She

then put my pad and belt on and covered me with my blanket and handed me a glass with more sherry.

“Drink *dragam*, you will feel terrible, this will help,” she instructed. “Go to sleep now, we will wake you in a few hours. Then you go home and sleep some more. There will be lots of cramping and bleeding. It will stop in three days, if no, go to your doctor.”

She led Mutti from the room so I could be alone. Tired, dazed and relieved that the ordeal was behind me, I slept.

Agnes was apparently very skillful. I did as she bid me and short of some horrendous cramping that kept me hunched for minutes at a time, I recovered quickly. By the following week I was dancing again – a little less energy initially but no worse for wear.

Sixteen-year-olds are heartless beasts. I didn’t care about what I had done. I was just glad it was over. The next time I had sex, I figured, was going to be with a ring on my finger because I wasn’t go through that ordeal again. I considered myself lucky, both Agnes and my mother told me tales of girls bleeding to death during the procedure I had just endured. We rode home in silence. Mutti put me to bed and treated me like a most precious invalid for five days after.

I went back to work full of determination to succeed. I knew I could never call either Bill or Warner about the screen test now. I couldn’t bear the thought of asking either of them for a favor. I would either make it on my own or not at all. I took every job that Amanda offered me, trying to get my own apartment quickly. Six months after the abortion I was on my own in a one bedroom suite at the Westwood in Hollywood. It was

a rundown, but respectable hotel where most of the girls from Amanda's troupe lived. I decided I didn't want to room. I was not a girly-girl in the sense that I wanted every night to be a pajama party. I wanted my own quiet apartment with my books and needlepoint. I had excitement enough dancing for hours and fending off undesirable suitors.

I had been dancing three years and was nearly twenty when Amanda gave me the chance to be part of the crew to perform at San Simeon for Marion Davies' birthday. William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper magnate, was the owner of the castle San Simeon. San Simeon was the *most* bizarre and opulent display of riches I have ever seen. I was lucky enough to view the mausoleum for the first time in January of 1937.

The Christoff dance troupe I'd been working with had been called by the Hearst people to perform various and sundry routines for the great man for a three-day soiree he was throwing for his famous actress girlfriend Marion Davies. Her birthday was on January 3, so Hearst decided he would begin the festivities on New Years Eve and concoct a 'wow' finish for the third. I was luckily part of the wow, which meant I got to stay for the whole four days. Otherwise once your bit was over you were none too gracefully shown the door.

Two limos picked up all twelve dancers in L.A. and drove the lot of us the whole 250 miles north to San Simeon. Located halfway between L.A. and San Francisco on the Pacific Highway, the castle on the 'Enchanted Hill' as it was called in Spanish, looked deceptively small from the road, but before the cars even made the trek up the winding road past the gates you could tell it would have a remarkable view of the Pacific Ocean. As the limos curved up the gentle hills, we all swung around in our seats to look out the

back window at the dark-blue sea. San Simeon was folded behind a soft green hill and scrubby palm trees and bushes. The cars curved in front of the white classical fountain that stood before Casa Grande, a magnificent mish mash of Spanish, Greek and 'stinking rich' design. Addie, one of the girls from the troop, clicked her gum and said rather disparagingly "I've seen bigger." From the hard glint in her eyes, I could see she'd used the line before.

"No honey," said Amanda, she was going to be our supervisor on this trip. "That's just the guest house, and trust me, you ain't seen bigger anywhere, wait till you see the pools." Amanda had performed at San Simeon every year since it was fit to be inhabited in 1927. Hearst and his architect Julia Morgan didn't finish tinkering with the place until 1947, but the most famous masquerades and balls were held for two decades before that. The castle was a collaborative project between Hearst and Morgan. Located on 250,000 acres this beach house is a one of a kind cash explosion. Originally dubbed Camp Hill by the family, because, it was on a hill and they camped there. Hearst told Morgan, when he was ready to build, that all he really wanted was a roof over his head when he camped. She was an overachiever. They created a 165 room main house, three guest cottages, and 127 acres of gardens, terraces, tennis courts, 2 pools – one indoor, one outdoor, walkways and a private zoo. The zoo floored me – monkeys, elephants, giraffes, lions and penguins, all living stupendously better than two-thirds of Americans at the time, certainly better than I was living if you consider the view and the servants. I liked the penguins the best, the resemblance to a tuxedoed Hearst was freakish, same bowling pin body and stiff manner.

After rehearsal we were free to roam the public parts of the estate, but the rehearsal room was so pretty we didn't mind just hanging out there. Mr. Hearst had given us the ballroom in the main house for our two daily two-hour rehearsals. This huge room dwarfed our little company. The walls were tiled in lovely shades of blue and gold. The parquet floor was so highly polished we had to make sure our shoes were well-scuffed before we entered just to get traction – not a problem for most of us living on a dancer's salary. The windows were curved at the tops and went all the way to the floor so that you could step out of them instead of using the door. No doubt, if there had been more of us we might have slipped away that way. But with only twelve, Amanda would have tracked us down in seconds. Plus we promised on pain of death that none of us would mess up here. The Hearst gigs were always extremely well-paying and the benefits were hard to pass up – lots of food, parties with celebrities and access to this insane world of excess everything. The rules were straightforward, we had to be back to the main house for meals and meal times were prompt. If you missed one you could get nothing until the next scheduled time. The servants were for the guests, I gathered, and we were just the working class. Still for two hours at a time I pretended otherwise and visited the incredible zoo or swam in the pools. The first day after we got settled, we went to the ballroom to look around. Amanda grabbed my waist and hand and we waltzed the entire length of the room while humming badly. The other ten joined in. In my mind I was Marie-Antoinette at Versailles and Amanda was my little numbered Louis.

After fully exhausting our humming repertoire we agreed to meet back there in two hours. Amanda, Addie and myself headed to the pool. Amanda took us directly to the

Neptune pool, a glorious, outdoor extravaganza bedizened with a crowd of classical statues and black geometric Greek designs on the floor of the pool. William Powell's home looked like a foreign hovel by comparison. Though the air was quite warm enough for us to bathe outside, and a few dozen people we didn't recognize were doing just that, Amanda told us to wait for better things. I thought to myself, what could possibly be better than a pool fit for Aphrodite? A pool fit for Zeus, of course. I'm embarrassed my imagination was so limited at the time.

That was the wonder of seeing San Simeon for the first time, the recognition that I didn't even have the imagination to dream up its grandeur, even if I'd had the funds to facilitate it. The indoor pool looked like a hidden grotto designed by Faberge, beautiful Mediterranean blue and gold tiles lined the walls, ceilings and floors of the pool. Best of all it was littered with A-list celebrities. Did I mention how much I adore celebrities? I adore them. They are simply prettier. And why shouldn't I like to be with my own kind?

Clark Gable was lounging in a little alcove beneath a balcony big enough to rival the box seats at the Hollywood Bowl. He was not alone. A busty brunette sat on his lap, her face curved up toward his. He really was a huge man, his shoulders dwarfing hers by half again. I stepped away from my fellow dancers, wanting to disassociate myself from them.

I kept staring directly at Mr. Gable till I caught his eye. He grinned widely at me. I grinned boldly back. My experience with William Powell had taught me that if you act like you know what you're doing, most people will think you do. Amanda, catching the exchange, grabbed my arm. I started at her touch.

“What?” I snapped, peeved at being interrupted.

“Look, but don’t touch,” she commanded in a low voice. “Not if you want to be asked back again. Those girls,” she nodded to the brown-haired tart giving Gable an aquatic cuddle, “don’t get invited back, they are merely the entertainment, their only appeal is their novelty, once that’s expired – which takes about three days and one gossiping guy, they might as well hit Hollywood and Vine after hours. They’re done.”

I almost replied that there was a stop between here and Hollywood and Vine. After all Mutti did fine by the clients at the Biltmore and was far too refined to administer her services in a pool. At least I thought she was. I began to wonder what exactly my mother did with her clients; that part of her life was entirely off limits to me. I had tentatively asked her once about the money she made. I wanted to know if she saved. It occurred to me that she would have to stop at some point, though she was still very lovely, the pink bloom of youth was long gone from her high cheekbones.

“Independence is key, Abby.” Mutti lectured. “It’s best without a husband, but perhaps a very old one will do. Old and no close relations. Don’t be too enamored of appearance, that’s fleeting. A bald pate in a silk hat is often a more devoted companion than a bare-headed Adonis without a farthing. Promise me you won’t be foolish enough to fall for some worthless Lothario that makes cow eyes at you. There are many reasons to be with a man, love is the least of those reasons.”

What about lust, I thought to myself now, turning back to gaze at Mr. Gable.

“Abby, I’m serious!” Amanda whispered furiously seizing my reeling attention again. “Also while we’re on the topic, no booze.”

“What?” I muttered, my eyes magnetically slipping back to Clark Gable’s, entranced as he ran his hands over the other girl’s body and looked keenly at me.

The male dancer, Paul, came up to us and heard the last line of our conversation.

“Abby-baby, that’s the deal, no booze, Amanda means it; ditch the flask somewhere it won’t be found.” I now carried a prettily appointed silver lady’s flask, a departing gift from William Powell.

“I have no intention of *ditching* it, Paul, it was a gift, and I adore it. Any way I’m of age.” I replied.

“Then, hide it, I *mean* it. If old Hearsty thinks we’ve brought liquor on the premise We’ll never get another gig again and the pay here is good.”

“The whole place is dry?”

“Nah, Hearst just likes to keep control of the all the booze. His, uh, lady friend is a bit of a tippler. He sleeps with the keys to the liquor cabinet under his pillow.”

“I bet the tooth fairy coughs up big time for those.”

“This is serious, some of us like to work, Abby.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll keep it under my skirt, literally, if he finds it there trust me, nobody’ll get fired and there should be cash bonuses for all.”

“Just be sure that you do, sweetheart, this is not the guy we want to mess with.”

I rolled my eyes. When I looked back to Mr. Gable’s alcove, he was gone.

Disappointed, Amanda and I went for a short swim and returned to our room to change for dinner and really explore the grounds. I pondered the hypocrisy of the booze situation. Hearst was hardly a saint. What right did he have to limit the alcohol intake of someone

he'd never even seen, namely me? Everyone knew Hearst lived openly with his movie star mistress Marion Davies. He'd deserted his fabulous wife, a lusty blonde from Brooklyn, and installed the more tepid Marion in his imposing monument.

The grounds were spectacularly decorated for the parties, a city of big tops held carny games, clowns performing magic, and flimsy trapeze artists. Everything that wasn't under a roof was beneath canvas. Nothing, however, could obscure the two ornamented towers of Casa Grande. They were inspired by a Spanish Cathedral I later found out and nothing gave a better indication of how this man viewed his castle and himself. The pope could not have been more lavishly apartmented.

Amanda, Paul and I wandered around the big tops outside for a bit. The Barnam and Bailey people who'd been hired to put this shindig together had outdone themselves. No circus I'd been to before or since was ever so spectacular. The costumes were obviously brand new – not a sequin was out of place.

Amanda was being chatted up by an attractive clown who wooed her by juggling ten balls and her shoe.

"I like a man that's good with his hands," I whispered in her ear as I came up behind her.

"Yeah, but imagine how many girls he juggles," she replied loud enough for him to hear. He grinned broadly, actually I think he grinned broadly with a permanently pasted on slick red mouth. He could have grimaced unbeknownst to us.

"I bet his bedroom's like a three ring circus. Performances every night," added Paul, mimicking a tight-rope walker. The clown dropped Amanda's shoe at her feet.

She plucked it off the ground, slid it on and waved goodbye.

“It’s just as well,” I responded as we walked away, “He’s probably just another clown.” We giggled like children as we left the rejected performer.

We wandered back along the path to the ballroom. Looking out over the property we could see zebras and elk roaming freely. I made a mental note to go back to the zoo. I was just charmed by the idea of owning such a thing. Perhaps because I suspect Hearst spent no more time at the zoo than he did with his guests – animals or people we were all just collectibles to him. Amanda had told me that most of his guests didn’t see him till cocktails before dinner. If you were really somebody, he supposedly lunched with you, but on the whole he avoided the crowds till later.

We grabbed our dance clothes from our rooms and made it to the Ballroom by 2:00 for rehearsal. Paul and I were doing the tango. They hadn’t told us yet where it was to be performed but we’d both tangoed a hundred times so neither one of us was very nervous. I loved rehearsals. Everyone looked so professional and busy. I really felt part of something creative during rehearsals. Performances were too important and tense for me to enjoy but during rehearsals everyone was friendly and called each other ‘hoofers’ and seemed to be on the same side. Rehearsal dress was very tidy, not like it was in the eighties with all those torn bits of cloth draped awkwardly around peoples’ shoulders. How those eighties girls concentrated on their steps with torn rags threatening to fall off, I’ll never figure out. We wore stockings always and a proper dance heel, about an inch and a half high. Some girls just wore leotards and stockings, some wore above-kneel

skirts that had some swirl to them and always their waists were belted so the line of the body could be seen.

I wore a peach – it had become my signature color - colored leotard, modest skirt and stockings. I loved the shorter skirts – anything that showed my legs.

Paul and I started off with our tango. Amanda wanted to make sure it was perfect because it was to be the wow at the end. I was a little surprised by this. Truly, Paul and I did a wonderful tango, possibly the best executed ever in California, but still – everyone had seen a tango before, I was skeptical about how ‘wow’ it could be.

“Stiffen up, Paul.” Amanda commanded. “Abby hold your hand to his back as if you are not touching him, like it is suspended in air. I want you both to look crisp, like stick people dancing, no curves, just pointy lines.”

We stiffened up, imagining poles where our spines should be and danced the length of the room. We tried several length variations since we weren’t sure where the dance would take place. I was hoping for the ballroom though, it was so lovely and such a pleasure to dance on. After about an hour, Paul and I split and went to practice with our groups for the other performances. I was part of a cutesy cake-bursting group of six that was to hide in Marion Davies birthday cake and dance out when she blew out the candles. This was happening in the early afternoon on the last day. I would have plenty of time in between to practice the tango in our appointed spot.

Our rehearsal took until five. After we finished I ran out and took the opportunity to explore the zoo. I stayed there until seven, when hunger pains drove me back to my room. Apparently I had missed the early meal, which was served promptly at six. I ended

up eating a pack of peanuts in my room, because I couldn't find a piece of bread for begging.

Amanda and Paul were to call for me at 9:45 and walk me to the dining room. We had been invited for cocktails and asked to mingle with the other guests. The house ran on Spanish hours. Breakfast was served from 9 to 12, lunch at 2:30, midday snack at 6:00, a half hour of cocktails at 10, then dinner. The Chief offered one drink per guest and the choices were appalling: a decanter of sherry or a silver shaker of Bacardi rum and fruit juices. Adding insult to injury, you weren't offered anything until Hearst and Marion appeared. At about 2 minutes after 10:00 Hearst and Marion would slip through an invisible door in the paneling and the festivities would begin.

I wore the dress I would wear for my performance with Paul. Amanda and I and a couple of the other girls had all agreed to share the piteous supply of evening clothes we had among us. My contribution was a floor-length Paquin-inspired dress. It had a plunging back, a deep 'V' front and a stiff skirt that fell in a curtain to the floor. It was the type of design Theda Bara would have worn in a movie – very dramatic and sexy. I felt a bit like a female vampire in it. I parted my hair in the center, waxed two pin curls on my cheeks and curved my hair in a low chignon. My blood-red lipstick set the tone as I answered the knock on my door promptly at 9:45.

I looked spectacular – at least that's what Paul told me when I opened my bedroom door. For some reason I was a little nervous. But unlike the nerves that plagued me at Furnace Creek Inn, these nerves I did not have to endure. I had since learned the antidote. I excused myself from Paul and Amanda and went to the ladies room. Sipping

from into my silver flask. Confidence springs eternal from good grog – unfortunately sure-footedness does not. By the time I floated out to the cocktail party I was feeling loose and free – not two words people associate with a well-behaved Hearst guest.

“Abby, I warned you,” Paul hissed in my ear before handing me a sprig of mint he kept in his silver cigarette case.

“Silly,” I whispered back and gratefully popped the mint leaf in my mouth. His hand tightened on my waist. “Just give Marion a drink.” I spied the lovely, lonely lady earlier in the day. She seemed vague and lost and sweet.

“Not your decision, Ab, don’t blow this. I mean it.” We were now a few steps from the dining room.

“How can I blow it?” I said, twirling dramatically in front of him, my skirt fanning out from all sides. “It’s a cocktail party. I’m nineteen and bee-u-tiful, you said so yourself. This is what I do.” I tweaked his nose, conspiratorially.

“Yes, but you are not normally gin-soaked,” He swatted my hand away from his nose and pinched his nostrils.

I threw my shoulders back and flared my own nostrils. “Never touch the stuff. I am a lady after all and ladies only drink sherry.” I do haughty very well.

“Well, lady, tone it down. We are going to walk in now.”

I grabbed his hand, feeling contrite and a little nauseous. I had only had a little sherry, but I hadn’t eaten since lunch. I supposed I’d missed the tea or supper or whatever was prepared to get people through till the 10:30 meal.

“I was feeling a little nervous,” I whispered. “Clark Gable is here, you know.

“Shh. Stand up straight and pretend you are a sober virgin queen.”

“Uhm, that would be no on both accounts,” I giggled but did as he said.

The dining room was magnificent. A massive rectangular dining table sat in the center of the dark paneled room. It was covered in what I had come to think of in such a short time as Hearst blue though really the Greeks had claimed it first. The paper napkins were blue and the china border was the same design as the tile from the indoor pool and the tile from the cupola on the main tower. Now that is attention to detail – though the paper napkins were a bit off-putting, but that seemed to be his signature, an unapologetic mixture of crass and class. Even some of the wine glasses were a pale shade of blue. Each place setting had four glasses, a water glass, champagne glass, a red wine glass and a white wine glass. For a man who wanted to keep a tight reign on the juice, he was certainly setting up temptations enough for a Baptist preacher.

At one end of the room there was a huge stone fireplace large enough to walk directly into. It was there that Clark Gable stood chatting with a boxy man with very red hair and freckles. I spotted Mr. Hearst there too. He looked to be crowding the red-haired man closer to the blazing fireplace. The red-haired man's face was getting nearly as red as his hair. He looked agitated. I watched for a minute as we stood near the table. Everything in the room was grand, not for the likes of mere mortals like Paul and me. But then I had decided at The Furnace Creek Inn I didn't want to keep company with mere mortals anymore, so here I was.

“Sunny,” someone called and I swung around.

“Bill,” I yelped and smiled in a very eager un-virgin queen-like way. I was thrilled to see a familiar face that also happened to be a famous one. We hadn’t seen each other in three years.

“Pill Howell, I mean, Bill Powell, this is my friend, Baul, er, Paul Dancers, Varcen I mean, we are dancing here this week. Whoopsy, my tongue’s a little twisted,” I grinned from one man to the other, as they shook hands like grown-ups. Bill looked terrific. He wore his tuxedo well, as if everyday was a tuxedo day which for Mr. Powell it probably was. There were such a lot of places to wear tuxes to in the thirties. People wore them to dinner clubs and balls and boat cruises. It was heavenly to see men so well dressed.

“Well, perhaps your tongue needs a little untwisting. Shall I get you some sherry?” Bill was ever the gentleman. But Paul shook his head negatively.

“The lady’s drinking only water this evening.” Bill was about to protest Paul’s plebian high-handedness when comprehension dawned on him.

“Sunny, have you been a naughty girl?”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

“That flask is for special occasions,” he scolded. “I’ll go get you some water.” He looked at Paul, “Can you keep her steady until I get back? I’ll try to wave one of the waitresses over here with some watercress too.” He looked down the length of the hall at Mr. Hearst. “Keep her away from the fireplace too, okay?” Paul nodded. Bill swept authoritatively through the crowd. All eyes turned to him briefly, his signature sardonic smile played on his lips as if he’d just been let in on a very good joke.

Just then Amanda came to join us. She had already found the sherry and was full of news about whom she had seen and what they were wearing.

“I’m just sure it was Theda Bara. She is kind of dumpy, did you know that? She kind of has a round tummy. You wouldn’t think it, being so slivery and sleek, but it’s true, come let me show you.” She caught my arm and dragged me with her.

Paul’s attention had been caught by the lovely Clara Bow who recognized him as one of the dancers from an earlier movie of hers. Mesmerized, he didn’t even notice as we bounded toward Theda Bara, which also happened to be in the direction of Clark Gable, Mr. Hearst and that fabulous fireplace.

Chapter Six

So are you bored yet? I must admit, I'm not. I find myself endlessly fascinating as any devoted narcissist should. Clark Gable was a dreamboat, halitosis and all. Wooden teeth you know, *for years*. It was his first wife, an old broad, Rhea, that got him fitted with decent chompers and made his career. Course, that didn't make kissing him any better. Vivien Leigh attested to that, indiscreet bitch, but then she preferred the fey-boys to grade A choice American men. Much like a real life Scarlett really. Give me a raw, broad-shouldered, take-no-prisoners kind of male who knows how to ravage any day, body smells be damned. I'll talk more about the King of Hollywood later.

Back to San Simeon - ridiculous in retrospect but stupendous to experience, especially the first time I was there. I luckily made it in before it parts of it began to be dismantled. Later in 1937, Hearst had to close his impressive zoo. He had created the largest private zoo in the world in 1923. The dancers and I were driven round the winding ranch road through fenced fields called Animal Hill chock full of antelopes, deer, bison, elk, zebras, kangaroos, yaks and camels roaming freely over the hillsides as if they were native to the land. I often wondered whether the animals objected to this small world approach to their living arrangements. The fiercer beasts like jaguars, leopards, tigers, cougars and lions were housed in the curved cement enclosures walking distance from the main house and four giraffes were kept in a small pen close to the side of the road. Many of the creatures could be seen from various windows in the Casa Grande. It was a strange and wonderful sight. George Bernard Shaw described San Simeon as the place

God would have built if he'd had the funds. I know nothing about God, but I can tell you from personal experience the Devil would have added a few more private alcoves for the inside pool. Hearst began dismantling the zoo when he ran out of funds in 1937.

Construction on the estate slowed and many of the animals were donated to public zoos or sold. Some were simply set free to graze, years later when I was an old woman I drove by the castle along Highway 1 I saw zebras playing on the hillside.

Hearst is here with me in hell – it's that whole camel/eye of the needle thing I suppose. Though I suspect his sins far exceed the usually wealthy man baggage. Then again he far exceeded the usual wealthy man in every respect. I was too young and stupid to comprehend just how extraordinary the guest list was that first time. In a relatively short length of time the man entertained Winston Churchill, Charles Lindbergh, Howard Hughes, George Bernhard Shaw, Calvin Coolidge and every name worth dropping in Hollywood. Who needs happiness when money can buy everything else? Happiness is fleeting, celebrities will stay for the weekend. There were so many people that I simply didn't recognize, though I remember being deeply impressed on one visit meeting Charles Lindbergh. After shaking his hand and looking into his clear blue eyes, I tore back to my bedroom and stood before my dressing table mirror rehearsing all the things I should have said in those few lost minutes I spent tongue-tied.

Foolish, foolish girl. That's what comes of no clear agenda, just random desires of fleeting feel-good moments.

Would I choose to do it differently now that I know more? No, probably not. My innocence and stupidity worked for me. The charm of a young, foolish girl trying to

appear worldly that probably gave me access that a more worldly me would have been denied. Hearst was a suspicious old bastard, if he thought you were scheming, you were gone in seconds. If you didn't obey his rules, you were gone in seconds. If you didn't play by his rules you were gone in seconds. Hell, if you showed up late for dinner you were gone in seconds. One of his henchmen (disguised as a footman) would arrive at your shoulder as discreetly as a lover, whisper in your ear and steer you by the elbow to a limo packed with all your thoroughly searched belongings sadly depleted of any cheering spirits, waiting to whisk you anywhere within a 250 mile radius. After that you would never be seen again at the ranch and only mentioned in a distant, slightly disapproving way. Like all great men he was a fierce controller who could not abide opposition, though some of his rules were so Victorian that opposition occurred frequently. Despite Hearst's attempt at a moral, wholesome environment facilitated by separate bunking for boys and girls, illicit sex was rampant, all the more thrilling for being kept underground. If you stayed in the main house Casa Grande, boys were kept in one wing and girls were kept in another. With over sixty thousand square feet and thirty-eight bedrooms, the randy always found places to mate.

Hearst referred to San Simeon – the ranch – like it was no more than a barn, outhouse and couple of cows. Understatement is so appealing, even if it is almost always disingenuous. Heart wasn't nearly so humble about his person. Everyone referred to him as the Chief, including his mistress Marion Davies. Chief, ranch -you see the cowboys and Indians theme – men truly are really just lovely little boys.

It's not such a secret though it took me years to learn and to mother them appropriately. Had I been more adept at it I may have kept the men I loved. I never, especially as a young girl, viewed men as a prize to be landed, despite what my mother advised. Instead I viewed myself as the award to be vied for. And certainly the game of coupling is played this way - the woman as coquette the man as the pursuer. That was where my marriage education ended. My parents marriage was no role model, ending abruptly as it did. So I did not learn the other half of the equation. The male pursues before marriage and the female pursues after. Wifedom really is about servitude, the most successful wives are the most skilled servants.

There was an understanding at Hearst mansion that the closer you were positioned to the dining hall fireplace when in conversation with Mr. Hearst the closer you were to being shown the door. The redheaded man speaking with Hearst and Mr. Gable was dangerously near the flames. As Paul and I drew nearer, we discovered the redheaded man was a pickled Spencer Tracy. It was obvious his inebriated state was trying Mr. Hearst's last nerve, it equally obvious by Mr. Gable's vacant expression he was oblivious to the tension. Later I would learn vacancy was his regular state of being. Being fairly polluted myself, I shimmied over to Mr. Hearst filled with liquid courage and introduced myself. I told him how I love his zoo and how thrilled I was to be dancing for he and Miss Davies. My eyes kept on darting to Mr. Gable's. Mr. Tracy looked on with a smirk on his face. Mr. Hearst nodded graciously and looked at me expectantly. I had left Paul

behind when I made my beeline for the chief. Now I had nothing more to say and no companion with which to exit the conversation gracefully. Mr. Gable just stared at me, unsmiling. The vacant expression vanished. I felt myself start to sway. Foolishly I could not move, I felt rooted to the floor. The fire from the hearth warmed me like a blast of desert air. I started to feel faint. A gentle hand grabbed my elbow, I turned to discovered Bill with my water.

“Here Sunny, water, just as you requested,” Bill glanced from Gable to Hearst to Tracy, his eyes merry and kind. “I see you’ve met the A-list.”

“Thank you,” I smiled gratefully at him. “That fire is very warm.” I turned and smiled again at the men, remembering as always to smile, because if thought to be a fool, at least it will be a friendly one.

Bill Powell knowing me was the best introduction I could have. Mr. Hearst liked Powell and his elegant ways. Hearst had been after him to act in yet another of the Hearst sponsored Davies period pieces. The costumed dramas Davies was cast in were often dreadful productions received with lukewarm attention from regular movie-goers. Even Mr. Hearst couldn’t turn tired melodrama and a miscast ingénue into a box office hit, no matter how many movie reviews he paid for. Sadly Marion Davies had real comic talent that was never to emerge from beneath the layers of petticoats and cherubic makeup heaped on her small frame. Hearst liked her best as a virginal maiden who loves chastely and remains untouched by masculine hands for the entire movie. Movies of contemporary couples in the thirties were much racier than that and somebody else kissing his girl was not something the married old millionaire could stand. I often wondered if he made her

wear the little Bo Peep get-ups in the boudoir too, just for kicks. I asked her once, but she never did tell. She was a protective little squaw of her big, bossy chief.

Mr. Tracy looked at Bill Powell and slurred, “Surely, ya can get her somtin’ better’n that.”

Bill shrugged, “It’s what the lady requested.”

“Ah, yes, thank you just the same. I don’t care for spirits,” I added lowering my eyes demurely, the floor straight lines of the parquet floor wiggled beneath my gaze. I really should have tried to find some food before swigging from my flask. My head began to ache.

“My ass,” Tracy muttered softly so that only I heard. I guess it takes one to know one.

Mr. Hearst looked at me admiringly more for my abstaining ways than my fantastic dress I knew. And Bill put a steadying hand on the small of my back and said, “Sunny, you look flushed from the fire come and sit down for a moment.” He moved me away from the danger zone and whispered quietly to me, “Honey, if you remember nothing else from this evening, and there is a good chance you won’t, remember to say as little as possible when lying. The greater the fib the more inclined the Gods are to take you down for it. Trust me.”

I nodded, uncomprehendingly. Between the warmth of the fire, the softness of the seat and the lateness of the hour - unless I was at the Cocoanut Club, bedtime for me was still ten o’clock. I am overly fond of sleep – I was ready to nestle down for the night. How these people weren’t half-famished eating at this hour I don’t know. My head

started to move in the direction of his shoulder, he stood up immediately and pulled me to my feet. Quickly we walked to my room and he left me at the door.

“Promise me Sunny, no more flask. Tonight you could have ended your career before you’d even started it. I nodded relieved to be just a few feet from a mattress. But I’m not always a quick learner.

Two days later, when getting ready for the performance, Paul knocked on my door in a panic.

“There have been some last minute changes Sunny in our Tango.” I was just fixing my pin curl to my cheek with wax, so I waved him in and returned to the vanity mirror. Carefully following the rules he left the bedroom door wide open, so everyone could witness the lack of hanky-panky.

“What?” I asked distractedly. I turned my head to check how well I’d blended my makeup. The makeup we used back then was like tar, thick and unforgiving, a girl could spend days just trying to even out the application.

“We have to tango on a roof top!”

I turned to him stunned. “What roof top?”

“The one by the Neptune Pool. You know the half-moon shaped Roman pillored outbuilding?”

I nodded. The pool was bordered by two such buildings, one on either end.

“Well, we’re to tango from one end to the other, then back to center and – get this – jump into the pool.”

“What?!” I was incredulous. I don’t think this has come up yet, I am absolutely not a daring type of girl. Dancing the tango sober in front of a crowd of celebrated strangers was enough to play havoc with my nerves. Dancing the tango sober on a rooftop then choosing to leave it’s relatively safety to jump into a pool, fully dressed, in my one fantastic dress, seemed excessive not to mention mind-numbingly terrifying.

“No.”

“You can’t say no. It’s Mr. Hearst’s personal request. His secretary says he’s been reading The Beautiful and The Damned. He wants a Fitzgerald moment.”

“Then let us a drink,” I replied tersely. “Why are they just telling us now?”

“Less time to back out I assume, anyway, we are going to do it. We don’t have a choice. If nothing else it should be a show stopper.” With that he turned and made for the door. “Oh and Abby, absolutely no booze. We are going to need our wits about us to pull this off gracefully.”

I looked at him as if he was insane and didn’t reply. Naturally I was going to drink, a lot. I didn’t like heights, I’ve never liked heights. It is perhaps the only benefit to being Hell-bound, the thought of hanging around on a cloud makes my stomach flip.

I drank as much as I could stand then fastened the flask to my thigh. I couldn’t believe I was going through with this. Paul and I stalked to the pool. There was a small ladder at the back of the outbuilding. I went off first, my stomach nauseus, Paul came up behind me. A well-executed tango takes precision, grace and crisply timed movements. Even if I hadn’t just consumed a mickey of gin, we didn’t stand a hope in hell. The

surface was curved, we'd never even practiced. I looked at Paul, my eyes wide and scared. He returned my look threefold, then he smelled my breath.

"Dammit Abby!" He had no time to say anymore, for the music had begun. The familiar, sharp notes announced our presence to the crowd gathered around the pool. We began shakily enough, but as our bodies moved in unison our confidence returned. Paul whisked me around. I held my breath, exhilarated by the air, the height and the crowd. The crowd was cheering noisily. We boldly moved very close to the edge. Paul started to perspire heavily. The sun was powerful in the sky. The next turn, I began to see spots before my eyes. Paul's hand felt wet and clammy in mine. Executing a quick flick of my head and hips I lost my footing and collapsed in an uninspired heap, Paul nearly toppled on top of me. The look on his face – well, you had to laugh, and I did. I've neglected to tell you about my great hooting laugh – when I laugh, people either laugh at me laughing or run for cover. Fortunately for me, Marion, a former chorus girl in the best tradition of the Prince and the chorus girl who was standing at the front of the crowd, had a helluva sense of humor.

I struggled to get out from under Paul, giggling. The gin had more than kicked in. There was only one thing to do I thought, this show was definitely over. I would just have to take the plunge. So plunge I did, with a beautifully arched swan dive.

Marion rushed out to meet me and help me out of the water – which was more than that humorless, rat Paul did – giggling all the while. The crowd applauded like mad. There's Fitzgerald for you I thought to myself. I'd bunged up my ankle when I'd collapsed on the roof, so off we hobbled, Marion and I, an odd couple, I was about a foot

taller than she. Once in the pool house, she locked the door. My alcoholic haze was thinning thanks to the shock of cold water. She placed me on the chair in front of my dressing table and settled herself on the rose silk Victorian settee. Her pale blue eyes regarded me with kindness. A pang of guilt waved over me, not an emotion I indulge in easily. But there was no guile in her gaze; her whole demeanor was so gentle, soft. She was about forty, her looks fading already. Never a classic beauty, she was still a pretty'sh woman, now with a champagne chin. I began to apologize.

“Miss Davies, I am so sorry, I don't know what came over me...”

“Could it be the alcohol?” She asked serenely.

“Oh absolutely, but I can...”

“Dearie I don't want any explanations, I want your stash. I glimpsed it when you hit the water”

Goggled-eyed, I hoisted my skirt. My flask was fastened to my thigh in a wild-west barmaid manner. I slipped the bottle free and handed it over.

“I could never keep mine there, that is the first place the Chief would look.” She chuckled and held up the bottle, “This is beautiful, where did you get it?”

I told her William Powell had given it to me. She and Bill were great pals and we chatted for a while about him. Then she asked me what I had said to Paul before I fell.

“I told him this was ridiculous, that it would just be easier to let you have a drink instead of putting on this ludicrous show for your entertainment.”

She closed her eyes and took another draw on the bottle. She savored the liquid in her mouth as if it were a Haut-Brion.

“I just meant that obviously this whole circus event, this whole house, everything was done for your benefit, and you didn’t really look all that delighted. I thought it would just be easier to give you what you wanted and be done with it.” At that I certainly expected to be tossed out on my soggy behind, but after all, she asked. It wasn’t as if I would be getting an invitation back anytime soon.

She said sadly. “He means well. He’s a very good man and he has very high standards.”

She handed me the bottle. “Put this away, if the Chief sees it he’ll kill you, and I want you to come back.”

I slipped the flask back in position and re-arranged my skirt. “Oh I don’t think that’s a possibility, I don’t think this dance troupe stuff is for me, even if it was I don’t think they’ll be using me again anytime soon.”

“My dear I don’t mean as a working girl, you’re really far too lovely to worry about that, and you have such a way about you. Just come and visit me again, I get so lonesome, even though the Chief fills the place every weekend with scads of people. Nobody seems to want to talk to me, and if they do, they don’t really want to have a conversation, they just want me to pass along some sort of self-serving flattery to him. I don’t mind mostly, he is very good to me and often is all the company I need, but sometimes, well, you know, or maybe you don’t, maybe you’re too young. Sometimes I just want someone to giggle with.”

Impulsively, I hugged her, and she hugged back.

I became a weekend fixture at San Simeon, and around town. She would take me to travel with her, and for some reason, Mr. Hearst didn't mind. Perhaps he really believed I was a tea-totter, perhaps his eagle eyes had not spotted my silver stash. This was completely out of character for him. Before me Marion hardly went anywhere. She usually stayed where he wanted her, which was at his side. I think, though, he took one look at my fresh faced appearance and assumed I posed no threat. Marion said he certainly never suspected anything about that fateful circus night, other than I was clumsy. And really, I did pose no threat, no one ever would. No matter how far away we went, Marion was his captive. Like a prisoner too used to her cell, Marion wouldn't even consider escape.

Chapter Seven

Thanks to Marion I became fast friends with Cary Grant, David Niven and other handsome men about town who Marion could hang around with now that I was her beard. Not that anything happened with her and these actors. They were just old friends the Chief didn't like her to see because he was a jealous son-of-a-bitch. However with the young beautiful me along, Marion convinced him she was merely chaperoning her new friend. Whether he guessed or just wanted the appearance of propriety I'll never know. For a married man openly living with another woman, he was a stuffy old prick.

But, he was a stuffy old prick with the means to make life delightful when he chose - and he sometimes did. For nearly four years he paid me to be Marion's personal companion. Yes, I was paid to baby-sit her. The idea was I would watch over her and make sure that she didn't get into trouble - truth be told our relationship often worked the other way around. The arrangement worked mostly because I was savvy enough never to be drunk in front of Hearst and Marion liked me enough to stop drinking in front of him altogether. He thought I was a good influence. Hah!

Hearst and his wife had a stunning apartment in Manhattan. Hearsty also kept a pied-a-terre at the Hotel Pierre on Fifth at Sixty-First Street for he and Marion to tryst. Their two rooms were beautifully proportioned and designed. They came with maid and concierge service for a thrifty \$550 a month. Marion and I had occasion to use the apartment sans the Chief several times. I tried to make the most of it. The Pierre had the swank Café for fun, all beige and green, and very, very gay. We would often pop down to

the Hotel Plaza on Fifty-Eighth Street and soak up the Gay Nineties feeling of the high-ceilinged hotel. We'd head to the back bar, slurp up the biggest, driest martinis in town, slink over to the Persian Room in time to catch French singer Jean Sablon and Dick Gasparre's orchestra. New York was an oasis for us - perfect place to indulge in the joy of wealth.

For all her access to excess, Marion was gleefully giddy about spending money. Generous to a fault, she included me in every scheme. We never stayed at the Pierre without each day being visited by the sturdy Ruth Eriksson. She worked out of the Belmont-Plaza but gladly hiked to us for our hour-long Swedish massages. I understand she was also gifted in colonic flushes – fortunately, I never had the privilege.

We made it a point to drop by Emme's on 56th to get our hats for the season. Emme was a clever creature capable of turning remnants to couture in the length of our stay - whatever that may be. I got so famous for my hats that a few years later the Brewster Hat Co. on Fifth created a hat they called the 'Sunny'. The 'Sunny' was a fine fur felt number with a brim softly tucked into graceful scallops and a crown that sloped away from the forehead. Stunning. Lucky on their part, because by the time they marketed it in Vogue February 15, 1942; I had money in my own right and nearly bought the lot of them. I was so bored with them a month later; I gave a stack to the Salvation Army. Not exactly what they were hoping for during wartime, but I bet I made a lot of women happy. The average American gal was rationed to 60 clothing coupons for the year. Can you imagine? That translated into approximately two dresses, two pairs of day shoes and a pittance of under linens. War *is* hell.

Lucky us. We weren't the average gals. We had such a lovely time of it.

One night, on a week long excursion to New York dragged Marion to the El Morocco.

"Sunny, the Chief would definitely not approve of this."

"Marion, it's the El Mo, it's famous, and I've never been here. Everytime we've come to New York we've missed this place. We're in New York for a whole week, we are no longer going to miss going to the only place worth going to." I was given to flights of hyperbole in my youth.

"Dearie, when you say the *only* place, you mean the only place Hedda Hopper and her rat-like cohorts cover in the tabloids regularly." We'd already set off flash bulbs as we made our way past the velvet rope. The El Mo was the first night club to recognize New Yorkers perverse attraction to velvet barriers.

"Precisely why I wanted to see for myself." I laughed. I settled back on the zebra-striped banquette and slipped a cigarette from my silver case. I made eye contact with a man lounging in the next booth; he rushed over to light it for me.

"Thank you," I murmured, and turned my attention back to Marion.

"My pleasure," he said smiling. "Miss Davies, how lovely to see you tonight."

"How do you do John? Sunny, John Perona is the owner of this malt shop."

Marion said by way of introduction, she was still peeved. "I was just telling Sunny, as much as I love the El Mo, if the Chief sees me photographed drinking here he'll flip."

"Well, we would not want to lose the patronage of two such delightful young women," he oozed, then signaled to the elegant maitre d' in white tie and tails to come

over, “Angelo, please make sure that the press give Miss Davies a wide berth. Mentions, I assume are okay, but no photographs at the table, correct?”

“Thank you, John.” Marion said smiling shyly.

“No problem, now I have a favor to ask of your friend, Miss Sunny?”

I cocked an eyebrow and said, “Sunny Gross.”

“Miss Gross, one of the things that ensure we keep getting the very best clientele at El Morocco is our cooperation with the press, we do favors and vice versa. Would you be willing to be photographed with some other young, beautiful women on a banquette - a photo-opportunity they call it.”

I glanced at Marion, uncertain whether to be flattered or insulted, she nodded, and whispered to me, “Get between two brunettes if you can, and make sure none of the damn blue zebra is visible around you.” Which shows just how savvy Marion wasn’t. If a girl is photographed at the El Mo, she damn well wants to be sure everybody knows it by having a revealing amount of navy blue zebra print in the picture.

Following my gut, I shook my head.

“I am very flattered, but thank you no. You are welcome to photograph me alone throughout the evening if you wish.” I stood to my full height, which was nearly his, looked at Marion and said, “I must powder my nose, please excuse me.” Then I sashayed to the ladies room in time with the music.

The ladies room, highlighted with two white plastic palm trees was the ultimate in kitsch, and the so-called café society loved it. That high-profile group, who would soon count me in their number, came into being thanks to the Hearst creation Cholly

Knickerbocker. Cholly was a *nom de plume* for many gossip columnists in the Hearst papers. In an early column, a reporter noted that people were going out to eat on Thursday nights – the cook’s night out. He named these people Café Society and it stuck.

I made my way back to the table to find Marion talking with a tall, lanky man in a well-cut tuxedo.

She looked up at me and cackled, “Dearie, you do have nerve, John didn’t quite know what to say. He did, however, know where to look.”

“He called Angelo over and told him to make sure you got your picture taken on the dance floor.” The man standing by Marion spoke to me.

He stood as I sat down. “I’m Wesley Hayden, how do you do?”

“Wesley decided to join us when the boys upstairs started getting frisky, isn’t that right darling?” Marion tittered and turned to me, “There is a naughty gentlemen’s tradition here at the El Mo,” she nudged Wesley, “feel free to jump in any time, Wesley, with the particulars.” He, looked at her, his facial expression sardonic, and did not speak. Marion giggled and continued. “These gentlemen in question get gently potted by midnight and indulge in the swordsman competition in the upstairs men’s room.”

“The swordsman competition?” I repeated.

“Pillars of society measuring their naughty bits against one another. Thanks to legend, Mr. Hayden has never had to compete.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I replied.

“Sunny is a wonderful dancer, the night I met her she was dancing,” Marion hinted shamelessly.

I laughed, “Yes, for about three minutes, before I was dog-paddling.”

Wesley raised an eyebrow and extended his hand to me.

“Would you like to dance? We could always swim later if you wish but for now we might as well give them something to photograph now or they’ll be hounding you all evening.” I looked at him closely. Very handsome, in a weathered sort of way. His eyes were sharp blue and his hair was dark – black Irish I think they call the combination. Striking. I took his hand.

He walked me to the center of the dance floor; mercifully he was a full head taller than I. The dress I wore was a sleek, languorous, bias cut gown, made in sumptuous black silk velvet. Its gallant sleeves and long, sweeping skirt set off a demure collar fastened at the neck, highlighted with a dramatic slit down the center of the bodice. Gorgeous, but not exactly made for dancing, swish too quickly in one direction and even a girl with small bazooms risks revelation. To avoid such exposure I probably pressed too closely against him.

“Friendly little girl aren’t you?” The photographers behind us were clicking like cicadas, why, I didn’t know.

“Don’t be too flattered, this dress sometimes gapes. And if it gapes, no doubt others will too,” I explained.

He laughed, “Clever, friendly and easy on the eyes. Did you meet Marion doing a movie?”

I looked up surprised. “Doing a movie?” I repeated.

“Yes, aren’t you an actress? You certainly look like one.”

“No, absolutely not,” I replied

“Would you like to be?”

“No thanks.”

“Really? If someone offered you a chance to be in a movie right now, you’d say no thanks.”

“Mhmm.”

“Really?”

“Why do you keep saying that? Yes, really.”

“Well, I don’t think I’ve met an attractive girl who did not want to be in movies if offered a chance.”

“Well, there you go Mr. Hayden, now you have.” I replied. He swung me around gracefully. He was really a lovely dancer, the kind that you coordinate your moves with instinctively. We swung by Marion’s table. William Powell and Cary Grant had joined her. I waved and Bill offered up a mock wolf whistle.

“Friends of yours?”

I nodded, “Yes. Bill and I go way back.”

“But you’re not an actress?”

“No sir, not an actress, and don’t want to be one.”

“May I be as so bold as to ask why?”

“Gainsay who dares,” I smirked with mock encouragement.

“Quite a smart mouth for someone dressed so elegantly.”

I laughed, “Will wonders never cease, ‘clever, attractive, smart, elegantly dressed, what a load of . . . compliments, I think I may blush.”

“I wouldn’t want you to pull something.”

“Is that right Mr. Hayden? You *wouldn’t* want me to pull something,” I was feeling beyond brazen.

“You do have a fresh mouth, little girl, I’d be careful, who you flirt with, I’m a grown up, but many men present are not.”

“I don’t want to work.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to work, acting or dancing, may seem glamorous, but not to me. Working seems utterly dull and I’d rather not, you see, I’m having a lot of fun.”

Wesley laughed loudly, as if taken by surprise.

Flash! That was the picture they printed in the Post the next day with this caption:

Hollywood Director Wesley Haydens laughs with latest love, girl about town, Sunny Gross. Wife hidden away in sanitarium in Los Angeles.

Chapter Eight

So Wesley, my Stork Club dreamboat, was married, the bastard. Not that I cared. He also had a good twenty years on me. Truman used to tease me dreadfully about Wesley long after I'd divorced him.

"You know," he drawled, scratching his chin absently with the nail file, "He was such a fucker. I just don't get it. A skirt-chasing gambler, no sense of humor. You must have just died of boredom. Oh well, youth *is* wasted on the young." He resumed his duties. "What was the business about his wife, anyway? That was before my time." Truman never failed to mention he was my junior by ten years.

"I didn't think malicious gossip had a statute of limitations with you." I narrowed my eyes and stuck out my tongue, but couldn't resist dishing. "Wesley's wife Athole was an actress, of course. Sort of. She was actually the sister of a Hollywood star who'd married a big time producer. Athole was far more beautiful than her older sister, Nancy Taylor, but she had the misfortune to be born second. No more than afterbirth, as far as mommy was concerned," Truman laughed appreciatively.

"That would explain that God-awful name she gave her." He responded. "Uncomfortably close to asshole isn't it?" I grinned. I loved gossiping with my little Tru-love, he understood what it meant to be an audience. He was giving me one of his famous pedicures – I tell you if that boy hadn't been a literary genius, he would have made a damn fine esthetician – and he was in the mood to target Wesley. Quelle surprise, it was

always some target or other with Tru. I was well into my second marriage with Christian Marcus at this point, so I was not distressed by his assessment. Not that I would have been even if I'd still been married to the old bugger – Tru never liked anyone but the person he was talking to at the time. So while Truman filed, clipped and buffed like a Polish beautician, while I read aloud letters Wesley had written to me prior to our marriage.

I continued on about Athole's dear old mum, "Her mother set her hopes and dreams of *la dolce vita* for the eldest and really had nothing left for the youngest. Athole was dragged to casting calls, beauty parlors, palm readers and astrologists all in hopes of helping big sis become *the glorious* Queen of MGM. It worked. Big sis enjoyed A-list status with a weekly paycheck of \$5000 from MGM, and not even the gossips dared mention she had the complexion of an Irish rummy on the high seas. Good 'ole Max Factor had his work cut out for him with that dame."

"Well look at the work he had to do on Marlene Dietrich, for God's sake, a nasty complexion was the least of it," Tru bitched, and then sucked in his round cheeks and pulled a starlet pose. The affect was more crab apple than movie star, but his surgery point was well- taken.

"I thought that tooth-pulling story was just a rumor," I replied, trying to readjust myself in the chair without mussing my polish.

This history meant, of course, that dear Athole was a bit loopy, perhaps she'd already been loopy, however this indifferent upbringing did nothing to help the cause. Serious abandonment and self-worth issues. In those days, which were really *thisclose* to

the days of the leper colonies, the treatment was straightforward – lock her up with other nutters and let 'em duke it out. She'd been locked up for three years before I met Wesley.

Naturally he had to wrangle a divorce to marry me. I didn't care how he did it, but I knew that I wasn't going to – well you know what I mean – until he did. I was in love but not stupid, not stupid. I hadn't had sex since the abortion and that was fine by me. There are other ways an athletic girl can satisfy herself without having to risk diapers and bottles. It wasn't a question of morality; God knows I had no morals or even rules of thumb for that matter. Everybody needs encouragement, a reward for good behavior.

Why sleep with the poor bastard and ruin his chance of earning me. I wanted to marry him. He was *trés* fetching. But I soon found out, besides being an extremely successful Hollywood director, and possessing two stunning homes, one per coast, he was fascinating and just dotty over me. *C'est l'amour*. Is there anything better than someone who adores you, who just simply can't see straight because of you?

Wesley's house in Benedict Canyon was too glorious, a vast rambling kind of rancher spilled on 10 acres. Inconceivably, nine months before for the wedding I announced we needed a new home. It was, I guess, along the lines of, new marriage new home. So the darling built me one. We intended to get married on the grounds. Naturally I wanted to have the ceremony on horseback. I simply adored horses; it seemed a grand idea at the time.

The things one can do with an unlimited budget – everyone should have the opportunity at least once, it's an eye-opening experience to rely solely on your own taste, with no other limitations. Wesley had given me carte blanche on the house, even his own

office, romantic trusting darling that he was. I pictured stables and two guest houses, a more or less permanent residence for Mutti, if she chose to quit her day job. I strode around the property in my oh-so-stylish trousers and Wesley's white shirt scratching detailed drawing after drawing on a thick white pad – an arbor here, a rock garden there – till I was quite dizzy with terror. What had I done? I'd never painted a room much less overseen the building of a 10,000 square foot manse before. I called Marion in a panic.

“Well, Madame Moviestar you've gotten me this far, now what do I do? Wesley seems to think I'm capable of this. Marion, the last time I did a job involved a swan dive from the top of a building drunk.”

She and I had been seeing less of each other – I was so wrapped up in Wesley. I think she felt a little abandoned. Plus ol' Hearsty didn't approve of my romantic situation – after all Wesley was still married. Some people can't see the ass for the trousers. But neither I, nor Marion were about to teach him self-awareness at his advanced age, and he hadn't exactly cut me off from her; he just wanted Wesley to get a quick divorce and make me respectable again.

“Sunny, sweetheart, don't be a twit – hire somebody. You can't manage this and if you want Wesley to think you can then simply pay extra to have the project manager disappear.”

“Deceive him even before we are married?” I asked primly.

“If you don't start now whenever are you going to practice?”

And beyond that advice, Marion, I soon discovered was useless. It was not an act. She never even picked out her own clothes, our hat excursions were the extent of her

apparel decisions. Hearst provided her with a personal maid for everything else. And recently he'd even purchased her a gorgeous Beaux Arts marble townhouse on the Upper West Side on 105th Street. Word on the street had it that Hearst had spent over a million dollars outfitting the joint in fountains and statuary. I guess he was hoping to obscure the gilded bars of her cage. The Pierre had become too social a venue for his little bird.

I really felt a keen absence of friends. I didn't have any girlfriends in particular that I wished to have as bridesmaids. I only really wanted my mother at the wedding and some of the Hollywood folk Wesley had introduced me to. I asked Bill Powell to give me away because he was really the only disinterested gentleman I knew. I lived a pretty solitary life till this point. My dancing pals were not really friends and I'd stopped spending time with them once Marion had taken me up. Now Wesley had taken me up, and so I passively bounced again to a new life not at all of my making. I couldn't really communicate my concerns to Wesley. He was a man, what would he know?

As much as I enjoy men, I don't really think I've ever had any respect for them. It's really hard to commit to a lord and master – laugh if you will, but that was the only deal to strike in the forties – if you don't trust his authority. The Freudians among you will no doubt blame my relationship with my father, and so be it. I didn't know why at the time, I only knew that when viewing the expanse of my newly built estate minutes before the wedding I felt less like the queen surveying her kingdom and more like a prized mare walking the fence. It would be my eternal conflict - motion versus domesticity.

The house was finished enough for us to make our December 7 wedding date. Yes, that's right. The day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. My choice, I wanted a Sunday, a day of rest. Though I wasn't religious, I enjoyed the notion of God taking a day off. I wasn't looking for blessings exactly, but I did think if we got married on a Sunday even God could attend. My timing, as I've mentioned, is impeccable. I don't generally believe in signs, though this one would make the most hard-boiled skeptic pause. As you can imagine, our wedding dinner took on a theme unlike any other. Instead of listening to the band Wesley hired to play we sat riveted by the radio bulletins and air raid sirens during our bridal repast. Were it not for my wondrous wedding gown, Pearl Harbor would have been the only memorable thing about my first wedding.

My dress was an exquisite antique, made famous a century before. Madame Sophia had tracked it down for me. To this day I don't know how she got her hands on it. When I told her I was getting married she insisted I visit her cottage before I looked anywhere else. When I arrived, her salon was scented with jasmine. Tea cups and saucers perched delicately on her coffee table.

"Sit down, Sunny, I'll be right back. Pour the tea. It should be steeped by now."

I poured and waited for her to return. My eyes adjusted to her tiny living space, carefully appointed as a Faberge egg. In she walked with what appeared to be a wisp of a curtain.

"On Christmas Eve," she began with a flourish, not telling but actually narrating "in 1803, Jerome Bonaparte, the brother of Napoleon, married a young American named

Elizabeth Patterson. Elizabeth, like you, was a very beautiful and modern young woman and she wanted her dress to be the most fashionable and the most *extra-ordinaire*. She chose a delicate dress of muslin and lace that, according to legend ‘would fit easily into a gentleman’s pocket.’ It caused a sensation naturally at the beginning of the nineteenth-century. It was quite a departure from the elaborate hooped costumes ladies were wearing. The dress was utterly immodest, but Elizabeth possessed true chic and wore it anyway, introducing the ‘Grecian’ drapery style to all in her set.”

She lovingly unfolded a sheer narrow muslin and lace dress the pale shade of moonlight. It was so feminine without being elaborate, short-puffed sleeves, a gathered bodice above an empire waist. Its purpose seemed more bridal trousseau than bridal outfit.

“It’s perfect Sophia,” I gushed. “I must have it.”

“It is yours, my *dragam*, on one condition, promise me you will simply tie your hair back.”

I looked at her strangely, “Why?”

“Trust me, all those Hollywood people will want to style you, resist them. They will look at the dress and want to put you in cascading curls or some such nonsense. Tell them no. I will not have this dress trivialized. Trust your instincts; I have seen more stupid looking brides in my time than I care to remember. Promise me.”

I hugged her, and thanked her for her advice, covered my heart with my hand, “I promise I will not trivialize my frail, little dress and I will do you proud, my *dragam*.”

Sophia, of course, was right, the dress was a sensation and our wedding photographs were printed in the top fashion magazines of the day. We barely got coverage in the newspapers – the war soaked up all the ink, but those fashion photographs marked the first time I led rather than followed fashion. It was a heady experience. I liked being good at something – even if it was simply dressing. Sophia's instincts about my hair were not as ridiculous as they seemed either – at a time when people were elaborately rolled and pinning their hair, I stood alone in the style of simplicity and it got me noticed. Years later Diana Vreeland demanded I donate the dress to Costume Institute at the Met. It is now part of their permanent collection.

The house, in the end, worked out too, thanks to a stroke of luck. Wesley loved that house even more than I did. In clearing out stuff from his old house I came across plans of a set he had designed for one of his best-loved movies, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. Our architect fleshed them out to make his fantasy home into a real one.

I was learning. Already I was more polished than when I started out in Death Valley. I had a hairstyle and an attitude. A girl can make a career from that. The hair was Sophia's suggestion. The attitude was my father's doing. There are really only two ways to grow when you've had a father like mine: either shrink or come out fighting. I chose the latter. I mocked, teased and taunted. And so far, it seemed to be working. Full steam ahead - never repent, never apologize.

I threw myself into the role of domestic animal with zeal. I decorated, really decorated, and loved it, planning and creating and recreating. I was good at it and greenery actually grew. I hovered over every detail of building from the moment the first

shovel broke ground. My confidence grew further. There is no mystery to life really. It's a confidence game. The wrong thing said with authority always trumps the right thing whimpered. When the construction was complete, I furnished the entire place without a decorator or a white bearskin rug in sight. It was stylish because I said it was stylish. And after all I was stylish – La Vreeland said so. And *who* was Vreeland: she was someone who said the most outrageous things with authority. Did I question myself? Yes, but I never spoke of it. It would ruin the illusion.

My first real home was a home one could name, that one was expected to name. I let Wesley agonize over that. He was the creative one, eventually he came up with Sunny Hollow. Sssh, I know what your thinking, how appropriate.

Chapter Nine

The doorbell chimes were excruciatingly loud. I eased to the front door, so as not to jar the axe I imagined lodged between my eyes. Wesley and I had enjoyed the final round of festivities from our wedding week the night before. I had yet to figure out the hired help situation, so it was up to me to answer the door. Wesley had left at the cock's crow for the set.

I tried to peak through the peep hole, but couldn't see anyone. I pulled at the center handle of the outsized door. "Yes," I whispered.

"Mr. Hayden here?" A loud, short man in an ill-fitting blazer squinted at me – a thug straight from central casting, it seemed. His hands were jammed in his jacket pockets as if he were cold. Strange pose for sunny California.

I drew myself up and inquired "Whom shall I say is calling?" This man felt vaguely menacing.

"Bruce"

"Well, Mr. Bruce, Mr. Hayden is unable to come to the door right now, if you would care to leave a card I would be happy to let him know you called." I kept my voice subdued but now disdainful. I did not like this pint-sized thug.

"Tell Hayden, I'll be back tomorrow at the same time. He better be prepared."

"What exactly should he prepare?" I had to know.

"His deposit," Bruce replied without missing a beat.

"You're his banker?"

“Yeah, and I guess I’m yours now too little lady,” he sneered, doffed his hat and turned around.

That visit was the first of our many creditors. Some menacing, some jovial and some embarrassingly (though I quickly learned not to show it) were the men I had worked with to complete the house. It seemed that while Wesley made an excess of cash it was never enough to cover his other excesses: gambling, women and more gambling. For the first year of our marriage the only expensive woman in his life was me. He and I were very much in love, and I’m happy to say he had no need for others. The gambling, however, continued unabated

Like many creative people, when Wesley committed to do something he did it whole-heartedly with a wild boyish enthusiasm that was impossible to quash – not that one would want to, his excitement was infectious. For three years before our marriage and for a few years after I remained one of his enthusiasms, even when he started tomcatting. He took me with him wherever he went, and for a man’s man like Wesley that led me to some pretty odd situations. I often felt I was the den mother to a bunch of crazy boys who happened to be twenty or thirty years my senior, dragged along from casino to casino. My job was to take care of transportation arrangements, make sure all the boys got home safely, and, of course, look delectable. Actually, there was more to it than that. I was to personify the *dame* - that long lost model feminism obliterated. She’s less hard-boiled than the broad and more knowing than the girl. Remember, these were mostly Hollywood boys we were hanging out with, the likes of Victor Fleming, Mike

Curtiz, Gary Cooper and Shipwreck Kelly. Women, for them, were types, and I embodied the Hayden woman.

The Hayden woman was elegant and tough. Nobody pushed her around but as a closet romantic, she was a fool for love. She walked into a pool hall or society ball with equal aplomb and by the time she left every man was half-in-love with her.

And no I didn't mind. In fact I had a blast. Despite our constant catch-up game of finances, I wore the most flattering clothes designed by studio designer Edith Head, a studio designer, arranged fetching town cars and enjoyed my ensemble cast of admirers. Wesley liked me being looked at almost as much as I did. In fact, even when our relationship was deteriorating after just two years of marriage, I could always please him by inflaming the desire of whatever man happened to be orbiting our space.

One of the things Wesley and I had in common throughout our marriage was his work. I had a collaborative interest in his career. He loved that he could speak with me about every aspect of his day without worrying about my angle. Soon he was bringing me scripts and headshots, asking for my thoughts and ideas. It has been my experience that work is often the best part of a man, though it tends to be the worst part of a woman, perhaps because women are capable of so much more. This is, no doubt, why my two marriages and all of my romantic relationships have been with working men. They were all, of course, terrifically rich working men, but they sang for their supper nonetheless.

One day, during a sunny, warm afternoon – quelle surprise - Wesley came home early, agitated. I was sitting cross-legged in my favorite chair in front of our unused fireplace, sewing. In those years I was a proficient needle-pointer thanks to Wesley's all-

consuming work schedule. Most of our friends suffered through this period with me, graciously receiving pillows with terrible puns like “Wet your beds” embroidered over a garden landscape. He tossed a faded paperback to me.

I looked at the book then up at him. “Hey there, handsome, is this a book in my lap or are you just glad to see me?”

“What do you think?”

“I take it you’ve found your next project.”

“*Our* next project,” he grinned broadly, “You.”

He looked wonderful as usual. He stood in white flannels, a navy blazer and a white shirt open at the neck. The midday sun bounced off his brass buttons. Although sailing made him nauseous, Wesley always affected a vaguely nautical style. He loved anything to do with yachting except being ship bound.

I picked up the book and untucked my legs. “Hemingway? Feeling a little literary darling? Is Selznick still trying to intellectualize Hollywood? Did he learn nothing from the death of Thalberg?”

“It’s not Selznick’s idea. It’s mine! And Thalberg died from pneumonia, Abby. Some things just aren’t that damn funny.” On occasion, Wesley would chastise me paternally. I suspect he felt justified because of our age difference, the arrogant chump. Thalberg was also a sore point for him. He had given Wesley his start at MGM and Wesley worshipped the man whose passion for prestige flicks and modesty were legendary. Thalberg had died six years before and David O. Selznick was considered his

successor in quality filmmaking - though not in humility. Wesley's behavior leaned more toward Selznick than Thalberg.

"It's perfect. The girl, she's just like you. Or at least she will be when I'm done with her."

"And the boy?" I asked, interested in spite of my chagrin.

"Boy? No boy. A man, a sea captain. He's a strong loner type. She's a stowaway escaping from something, I think. I don't know what, I haven't read it." He paced back and forth in front of the stone fireplace, hands clenched behind his back, his white cuffs snapping around his ankles.

"Hemingway didn't figure out what she was escaping from?" I questioned, cocking an eyebrow. After all, as a writer Hemingway had quite a reputation – even Hollywood had heard of him.

"Yeah he did, but it was no good, I want her to be mysterious, a smart ass. She's gotta come on pretty strong, too," he said without irony.

"A woman of easy virtue with a heart of gold?" I questioned.

He sniggered, "Exactly, only not at all - more complicated. She's gotta keep you guessing; there is the very real possibility she's just a good girl with a bad attitude."

I walked over to him, my arms encircled his waist and my lips nuzzled his neck.

"Nobody'd believe it." We kissed.

I pulled away after a while, "So what's next?"

"Hemingway," he replied, holding me at arms length. "We've got to get the rights to the book."

“Can’t you just have somebody write the story you want?” I was aware of what occurred with these Hollywood “book” movies. The title of the book is often the only thing that remains unchanged and not even that sometimes. It struck me as a little silly to spend what it would cost to secure Hem’s name, when the cash could be put toward the actual production.

“I want the story, the title and Hemingway’s name. I’m gonna need it to get financing anyway. Nobody’s going to see the story as bankable unless I’ve got something else. In this case it’s Hem.”

Naturally I was to go too. Off to Havana where Papa, as we were soon able to call him, hung his sweat-stained, unlaundered hat. At first I hadn’t planned on going, though I longed to. I was always up for any kind of travel, but Hemingway was a notorious man’s man, or so he let it be known. But Wesley was adamant, I quickly understood why. For a bright guy, Wesley rarely read about anything he hadn’t bet on and had come to rely on me to tell him the story. That and I had become a crack shot during my San Simeon days, something Wes didn’t have the time to perfect, but would greatly impress Hemingway.

We were to meet Hem’s agent Christian Marcus there - yes, the same Christian - my future husband. The world gets noticeably smaller the higher up the food chain you go. My dear chum Bill Powell decided to join us. There was some talk of him being involved in the project, so Wesley hoped to dazzle Hem with Bill’s star power. Ridiculous, of course. William Powell’s urbane characters were hardly Hemingway men. But it was a lark to have him along just the same. While Wesley and Christian seduced Hem, Bill and I could play.

A tatty blond met us at the airport to drive us to Hem's place. Mary Walsh was a journalist Hem had met in London while covering the war. Though he was still technically married to Martha Gellhorn, Mary had moved in and set up shop as Hem's lady of the house. By all accounts, including his own, he treated her like shit. Yet she was everything he needed in a woman. A great shot, docile, obedient and utterly impressed by his genius, she was also fantastically protective and jealous of Hemingway. Unfortunately she cast a fish-eyed glance in my direction and started stroking her rifle.

Hemingway's place, The Finca Vigia, was an old estate located in the village of San Francisco de Paula, fifteen miles from Havana. It had a neglected farm appeal, a ramshackle villa and guest cottage, a slightly overgrown tennis court and shabby pool. The grounds were lovely and unreigned – much like Hem himself. Thirteen acres of knotted gardens and lush fruit trees that nature was threatening to reclaim. Mary showed Wesley and me to our little villa. We were the guests of honor, I suppose, because we represented cash. The villa was simply a room cast to the side of the estate. The interior was simply plain walls the color of age, with a lumpy double bed under a fiesta-striped blanket, and an open closet exposing bent, wire hangers. I immediately unpacked.

Wesley brought along his and hers hunter kits. He had the beige, safari vests covered in more pockets than we had bullets, the heavy tread boots and all manner of khakis. Being a director Wesley was always aware of the 'look.' He adopted the yachting style because it suited him, clean lines, and crisp colors of navy and white enhanced his Irish good looks. For me he was no less diligent. He actually polished and finished what came to be known as my look. He and Madame Sophie, it seemed, were in complete

agreement about how I should dress. The only difference was Wesley put his heart *and* money into it. Madame Sophie had to act within the constraints of my budget. He taught me the power of palette dressing. Pick your color scheme and stick to it. Everything matches everything in tone and you simply let fabric texture dress you up or down. For this trip I packed only beige and ivory.

“Perhaps you should take these outside and scuff them up a bit,” I suggested, holding up his untrodden boots. Just because I followed his advice about fashion didn’t mean I stopped mocking him.

He laughed, “Where is wardrobe when you need them?”

There was a clanking on the cabin door. “Hey Sunny, Wesley, the great man himself has summoned us for cocktails, via Mary.” I let Bill in. “Whoa, you guys obviously got the deluxe suite; maybe I should travel with a lady.”

Wesley grabbed me around the waist. “Get your own, this one’s taken.” I snuggled in, enjoying the closeness.

I slipped a comb through my hair and pulled it back in a low pony tail, tossed a sweater over my shoulders and off we tramped to the main house. We walked up sun bleached steps to the front entrance, protected from the elements by two white pillars and a profusion of palm fronds.

The main room was long and narrow with simple décor - a large sofa and two Papa-sized armchairs covered in white duck, one was Hem’s, easily identifiable by the book stacks barricading it on three sides. Low book shelves and mounted animal heads adorned the wall space. Beyond the abundant nests of reading material, the only other

dominant feature was a painting by Joan Miro that hung in the dining area. Not a remarkable house and nary a woman's touch in sight.

The attraction, of course, was Hemingway - paint wall-hangings could hardly compete so why bother. Mary, who would become his fourth and final wife, was underwhelmed with our arrival and unsophisticated enough to show it. She'd been called a 'fidgety banty hen of a woman' and I couldn't agree more. She was omnipresent, scuttling around, *doing*, uselessly busy. A former war-correspondent in England, which I suppose is impressive, she knew nothing about entertaining, and even less about entertaining a man like Hem. And of course the oddest thing was her accent.

I am happy to leave people to their pretensions; indeed, I admire people who go to great lengths to recreate themselves into creatures they'd rather be, or as in Wesley's case, creatures they believe they are. I have only one caveat – do it well. Practice and get the whole damn façade down, and if Lord help you, you happen to show a taped hemline, laugh, God dammit, laugh loud. Earnest little Mary didn't have a clue; she'd adopted a deep, affected voice that occasionally slipped into a squeak. We, as guests, were supposed to ignore this – which was thoroughly exhausting, because, after all, squeaks are jarring. Mercifully, we did not spend time focusing on Mary. Hem was waiting for us, his famous cocktail in hand.

"Well, well, now I can see why Miss Mary is all in a tizzy," he said smiling broadly at me, "You are a sight, Miss Sunsky," He extended a thick paw. He was huge, a big man with an even bigger field of current around him. For the first moment in my life I

was speechless, he just sucked up all the air. He was the most charismatic man I have ever met.

Bill, ever the social grease, recognizing my befuddlement, stepped in. “Not only does she look that good, she also shoots and rides better than most of Hollywood.”

I winked gratefully.

Hem smirked. “From what I know of Hollywood types that wouldn’t be too hard, would it now? How are you Mr. Powell, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Bill was actually diffident, he felt Hem’s power too. “The pleasure is all mine sir, thanks very much for your hospitality.”

“I consider anyone about to pay me a shitload of cash a friend, and you all are about to pay me a shitload, aren’t you?” He guffawed, and then gave us permission to use his pet name, Papa. I liked him a lot and wasn’t about to call him Papa. That was one word I had bad associations with.

Christian Marcus entered the great room looking devastatingly handsome and right at home. “Well Hem, I can see you’ve already made your case, so my work here is done, let’s drink.”

“A man after my own heart. Mary, bring in the cocktails. This, Miss Sunsky, is my very own concoction; I call it a ‘Papa Doble’”

“Papa invented it at Sloppy Joe’s Bar in Florida,” Christian finished for Hemingway. He spoke directly to me. I felt my face grow warm. He was extremely attractive. I’d of course heard of him. He was a well-known ladies man who managed to avoid all the sleazy connotations that phrase usually brings. He just loved women, dames,

broads, tarts and temptresses - the more challenging, the better. Mary came back with a metal tray of daiquiris. She handed the first to Bill with a shy smile.

“Mary, for Christ sake, serve Miss Sunsky first. You serve ladies first, and Miss Sunsky is obviously a lady. You may think Powell is prettier,” Papa barked, “but I sure as hell don’t.”

Bill smoothed this. “Well Mis-er...Papa I can safely say I’m delighted with your sentiment. You see I love to dance but would hate to relinquish the lead.” He took a sip as we all expended a nervous chuckle. “This is delicious, what’s your secret?”

He directed his question at Mary but Hem chose to answer.

“Two ounces of white rum, juice from two limes and half a grapefruit, and Maraschino liquor floating on top. Serve over crushed ice and imbibe in great quantities.”

Mary passed out the rest of the drinks - avoiding my gaze when she handed me my glass - and we all settled on the furniture. Well, all except Mary, who simply hovered. We intended to stay for just a few nights but that easily extended to a week.

We fell into our routines. Ernest wrote standing up from first light until lunch; Bill and I swam, played tennis, and did a little sight-seeing. Wesley and Christian spent their mornings discussing scripts, business and Hollywood trivia whenever Christian could peel himself away from the telephone – his one life-long commitment. And Mary, I don’t know exactly what Mary did, more hovering I suppose. However, at lunchtime Hem would appear and the fun would begin.

“Let’s shoot,” he’d roar, or “Let’s go to the Floridita to have our Papa Dobles,” or “Let’s fish.”

The Floridita was the selection we most often made. Not only was it a pleasant bar, it was by far the most appealing place to spend a lunch or dinner. We all relaxed there, even Mary. The intensity of Papa was diffused somewhat by having others around and Mary didn't have to worry about entertaining, which I may have mentioned was not her forte. By the time we'd guzzled a few Papa Dobles all seemed right with the world. In fact, it was at Floridita that Wesley finally nailed down the details for our movie and had Hem sign off on it. Christian secured a heaping helping of greenbacks for our resident genius and Wesley could do pretty much whatever the hell he pleased with the book, which is exactly what he did.

Our final day in Cuba, Hem insisted we go fishing on his beloved boat, the Pilar.

"It's the second day after the full moon, the time is right," he insisted solemnly like some mystic medicine man. I looked at him quizzically.

"Marlins feed near the surface the three days before the full moon and three days after."

The Pilar was a fine, dark wooden fishing boat named partly after the Pilar shrine (in honor of the patron saint of Zaragoza) in Spain and partly after his second wife Pauline, who had given herself the nickname, "Pilar" when first courting Ernest. He purchased it in 1934 for \$7500 and beyond perhaps his first wife Hadley, the boat was the female he loved most in his lifetime. She wasn't, however - unlike Hadley - a large vessel, so when Hem planned to take us out I wondered how he'd work it. Christian flew back to America that day after sending a few flirtatious glances my way, so that just left Wesley, Bill and

I, plus Hem and Mary. I just assumed, call me a pre-feminist creature, that the men would go and Mary and I would fend for ourselves back at the house, freed from the need to make nice to each other before witnesses.

No such luck. Hem would not leave Miss Sunsky alone. After all he'd only just met me and had to find out if I was as fine a fisher as I was a shot. Mary glowered. It was Wesley who was to be left behind. Now that he had his deal in hand Wesley felt no compunction to take his manly charade off dry land. This tickled Papa. It meant that he could have me all to himself, which he made no bones about desiring.

I was a bit worried about how we would all interact in such a small space and Wesley warned me to stay away from the sides of the boat.

"I don't know sweetheart, better you than me," Wesley said, "A crowd on that dusty old raft with Mary the killer bride, just be careful. If you want you can just bow out. Say you're sick or something."

"I can't do that. It would be rude." Plus I didn't want to. Sure there was the danger that Mary might find a way to dump me overboard, but I didn't want to spend a moment away from Hem. Wesley knew this too. I had a bit of a crush. Nothing physical, not really, I like regular bathers. Hem was a stranger to soap cake. But I did like the attention. The "Are you comfy Miss Sunsky? Can I get you another drink Miss Sunsky? Somebody bring Miss Sunsky a tall, cool one she sure looks parched." It was delicious, all that detailed attention from such a great man. Something I didn't see him offer, even

in broad strokes, to his current ball and chain. That is, of course the not-so-confidential secret of most men. They'll be doll babies till they have you, really have you, and I don't mean just marry you. There are ways to keep yourself in reserve, even from your spouse if you're clever, but let them have you utterly and wham. *C'est fini*.

Unfortunately, this is not always true. It was definitely true of Wesley. Relationships are like language, once you figure out a rule that's all encompassing, like the ever popular "T" before "E" except after "C" you stumble across a word like 'their' and it's all for naught. Christian was where I stumbled. He liked the chase and relished the having. And I miscalculated. With Hem, it was all about the casting and when you were hooked, as poor Mary was, that hook might as well be through your eye for all he cared.

Off we went boating, and to the surprise of Bill and me, Mary tagged behind in a separate boat called the *Tin Kid*. This was apparently the norm.

"What the hell do you suppose that's all about?" I whispered to Bill on the dock when Ernest and his captain, Gregorio, were loading the *Pilar*. Bill didn't answer; he just rolled his eyes at me. My hand visored my eyes. The sun was punishing. "She is going to fry out there." Her skin was already pleated with sun damage.

"Bill, really, this is the oddest marriage I have ever seen. Think about it, this is their honeymoon."

“Don’t be disingenuous Sun, it doesn’t suit you. Papa’s got a sneaker for you and there’s no room for little Mary on the boat,” he muttered back, taking the situation, as usual in stride. I learned so much from that man.

“Why does she take it? I would slaughter him.”

“Yeah, and I guess that’s why you’re Miss Sunsky huh?” He replied.

“What the hell are you two conspiring about?” Hem sidled over to us, menacing a fish knife.

“Doesn’t matter now,” I said smiling, “The fact that you’re armed has foiled our plans. I want to catch a fish, Ernest, a great big one.”

“That’s my girl; come on then, the *Pilar* is waiting.”

We clambered aboard, and Mary slipped into the *Tin Kid*, attached to the back of the *Pilar* without any shelter. She spent the whole day there in that tiny boat, broiling to a ruddy hue.

Some twenty miles south of the lower Keys and Key West lay the hunting ground for Marlin. A ludicrous endeavor for a day trip from what Hem told us. Apparently the well-experienced fisherman catches one marlin per every 24-hour period of serious fishing (three eight-hour days). So, though trolling for Marlin, we caught mostly tuna and barracuda and a great big bucket of boredom.

Mary set herself free from the Pilar to give us maximum maneuverability. Ernest got me all kitted out. He was one of the first fishermen to use outriggers, he told us. And what cumbersome things they were. These forerunners of the modern outriggers were made of wood and were fixed, not folding up against the wheel house of the boat. This gave the vessel a prickly pine cone look.

After about thirty minutes of putting the lures in the water, I felt bored and wished Hem had brought some of his special cocktails. Alternately hot and cold, I baked in the sun and shivered in the spray. Two hours later Bill, fresh out of cigarettes, leaned on me to share my stash. I adore Bill, love him like a Daddy, a good daddy that is, but really, a girl can only do so much for the men in her life. And being stuck on a boat in the middle of nowhere with three men, no booze, no fish *and* no cigarettes – well I had limits. I gave Bill one cig and told him to bother me no more. My little cigs were the only thing keeping me from walking the plank for the sheer adventure of it. Plus, the ridiculous harness Hem had me put on felt like it was rubbing my white thighs red. I started to explain this to Hem, but then it occurred to me he probably finds raw flesh titillating, if Mary's complexion was anything to go by. And I didn't want to disappoint Hem. For some reason he conjured a character and wanted me to be her. I wanted to be her too I guess – stoic, capable, uncomplaining. Looking back now, she was pretty one dimensional or perhaps it was just my interpretation. After all he *was* Hemingway.

Four hours in, Bill and I were stupid with silliness. We tried our hardest not to fall on our knees and beg Hem to take us back. Hem and his Captain ignored us, catching and releasing tuna instead. At first Hem tried to engage us by sharing deep sea secrets.

“If you’re just going to release a tuna fish, turn it over so that it’s belly up. It actually calms ‘em right down and makes for an easier release. They get moving a lot quicker after being put back in the water.” Fascinating.

Mary, well behind us now, read a book in her little skiff. I actually thought of her book with longing. Here we floated with the 20th century’s greatest American writer and not a whit of reading material to be found anywhere. Bill and I started trading impressions of people we knew. I was right in the middle of a dead-on Marie Dressler; fish net stuck under my shirt to affect her pronounced uni-bosom, when I felt a strike, actually more like a full-body yank. I almost toppled, found my footing and pulled back in surprise.

“Ernest, I’m caught on something,” I called out feeling somewhat foolish, trying to ease the net from beneath my shirt.

“There’s only one thing to be caught on here, Miss Sunsky,” Hem shouted back, making his way over. A cobalt blue marlin flashed between the outriggers and raced back and forth trying to decide which lure to eat. “And that’s a big goddamn fish. Pardon my language.”

“This is a big goddamn fish!” I screamed. I felt electrified. It looked glorious, truly a rarified creature. The marlin torpedoed the starboard bait, and the battle began. I clutched the rod with all my might. Two hours flew by, adrenaline caffinating my body, while I clung to the rod. My hands chafed and bloodied with the effort. The harness helped ground me as I felt myself flung around like bait fish. A searing pain in my back pulled me forward while the Marlin dragged the rod, my harness against me. I looked over at Hemingway desperately. I was terrified. I motioned to let Hem do the honors.

“Hold it Miss Sunsky; you don’t let him get you.”

“Ernest, for Christ sakes, take this damn thing, I don’t know how to fish!” I hollered, anguished. He shook his head. Bill looked over amazed and helpless; he knew no more how to land a fish than I did. I hadn’t caught this thing – it had caught me. I was just along for the ride. Bill, my sweet friend knowing my passivity did move to try and help me till Hemingway stopped him.

Ernest looked me in the eye and said, “You kill it.”

“No” I protested, my arms felt shattered. He watched me flail. How could he not know? I do not do – ever. I am lovely, charming and occasionally witty. He was missing my point.

He called out to the others, “Nobody touches the rod but Sunny.” The sun was a sharp, white spotlight in the sky. Ernest had seen me shoot pheasant and doves at the beginning of the week, but with guns the hunter is removed from the kill. Plus, I’d been

taught to shoot before Buddy was born, when it looked like dad wasn't going to get a son. It came easily to me. I had a steady hand and a clear eye. There was no effort involved. This I had to put my body into. Move with it. He crouched beside me. Two hours later, I stopped feeling my hands. My knees buckled, and I thought I would faint. I looked at Hem, my eyes imploring him to get off his ass and help me.

He brushed me off, swelling with arrogance. "You have to kill it yourself, Sun. It's the only thing that counts."

My resolve strengthened, not because of his words – the melodramatic prick – but because I was damned if I was going to faint in front of him. I hate bullies. They remind me too much of dear old, dead dad. So I not only put on my game face but got in the game. I pulled and I pulled, the line slackened as we circled. They all watched me. Were they willing me to fail?

"How long can he last?" The harness sliced into my thighs.

Hem's Captain looked over grimly, "It's early yet. He's not ready to give in. It will still be hours, maybe longer."

"Maybe longer?" I screeched, looking at Hemingway with unabashed hatred.

"You can do it Sun, I know you can, focus and relax. Let him carry you. Trust me you'll remember this moment for the rest of your life."

My hands were torn all the way to my wrists. I was horrified. I tried to concentrate on the pain in them, to focus all the pain I was feeling into just one area.

“Ernest, she’s exhausted, she doesn’t need to remember this for the rest of her life, she bleeding for God’s sake, help her out.”

Ernest ignored Bill’s words. Bill found a cotton shirt I had brought with me and tore it into strips and wrapped my hands as best he could while I gripped tightly to the rod. The rest of it he tucked beneath the harness on my thighs, giving me momentary relief. I breathed deeply.

The marlin played me for many miles east along the wall, sounding several times before he settled down. He reared and coasted. I kept a grip more easily now, the rod was burnished into my hands. It was harder to remove them than to keep them steady. Wobbly with exhaustion, Bill moved in again to help; Ernest brandished his fish knife in jest, warning Bill away. My arms and legs banded with the effort. Finally we circled a last time, the marlin yielded to a heavy drag. One hundred and eighty pounds - a small marlin by big game standards but all mine.

Hem hopped around shouting “She did it, she did it.” I held to the rod for many minutes longer, trying to absorb that the bastard was really dead and the ordeal was over.

“You did it!” He bounced beside me. Everyone let out a cheer. Bill peeled my hands from the rod.. He seared them with rubbing alcohol from the ship’s medic kit. That pain jolted me from my reverie.

“Somebody get me a goddam drink!” I bellowed, feeling, what I can only describe as a surge of testosterone. Bill stepped back, looking amazed at my recovery. If I’m going to play a part, I’m going to play it well.

Hem looked over delighted, “You heard the lady, Powell. Get her a goddam drink.” I stepped from the harness Bill had unhooked. Bill looked from me to Hem and back as if we were loopy.

Always sensitive to the director’s, in this case Hem’s, needs, he played along and yelled back in a hearty voice, “You mean you’ve actually got something besides soda on this heap?” Hem waved a bottle of bourbon in the air. Bill grabbed at it like a thirsty man in a sandstorm.

“If you aren’t the luckiest damn thing. You don’t even know how rare this is?” Ernest’s Captain gaped at me with admiration. “Papa said you were the real thing.”

“I knew you could do it, even if others didn’t, Miss Sunsky,” Ernest shot a nasty glance at Bill. “Marlin fishing is the purist form of big game fishing and you’ve gotta do it yourself.”

“What? Not Yellowtail?” Bill queried an edge to his voice, no doubt feeling a bit disagreeable after being menaced for a second time in a day with a fishing knife.

Hem's testosterone flowed palpably as mine, "When a yellowtail can tail walk across the water at sixty miles an hour forcing hundreds of yards of line to be dumped into the foam in only a few seconds, then I'll like yellowtail."

Bill let Hem have the last word and commandeered the bourbon. He then made a bed for me on the bulkhead. I passed out. We headed for home.

Chapter Ten

I read Hem's book on the plane. Wesley was keen to start immediately. He interrupted me practically every second page. Questioning me about setting or character. If I just so much as breathed heavily he wanted to know why. Finally, I dog-eared the page, passed him the novel and went to sleep. Our aircraft had barely shadowed the L.A. skyline before he was making arrangements to get Humphrey Bogart for the lead. Bogart, an accomplished character actor with a handsome/ugly mug, had emerged as a romantic leading man in his last film, *Casablanca*, a studio-saving success for Warner Brothers. Jack Warner wanted to pop Bogie into another romantic lead role as soon as possible, so negotiations were smooth. The only hiccup was the leading lady. Warner's and Wesley wanted an unknown. For Warner's, it was to keep costs down. Wesley just wanted to play Svengali.

Every night he brought home stacks of photos. We'd sit on the patio, I'd make whiskey sours and examine every last pore on each starlet's face.

"She looks myopic," Wesley would say pointing to a fluffy-haired blonde sporting big bazooms.

"You don't even know what that word means," I teased.

"I know what it sounds like it means and it sounds like it means she looks stupid."

“Not to put too fine a point on it. Or two points in her case.”

“Yeah, she can’t have big tits.” Wesley placed the fluffy blond in the ‘not even if she’s polishing the studio head’ file.

“Why on earth not?” I looked up from the stacks with interest.

“She’s gotta be smart, nobody’ll believe a broad with big tits could be smart.”

“That’s utterly ridiculous; you are going to discriminate against every well-endowed actress simply because she fills out a brassiere?”

He nodded.

“This is Hollywood - use some movie magic, tape’em down.”

He looked up, intrigued, “Tape’em down?” he repeated.

I nodded, “Like the flappers did in the twenties, tape them down so they won’t be an issue.”

“You mean take a pair of perfectly beautiful, big, bouncy boobs and restrain them?” he was incredulous.

“It’s not sacrilege, my horrified little boy, it’s a way to give everyone a fair shot.”

“Nah, just weed out the ones with big tits.”

My Romeo, what a gentleman.

We were getting along wonderfully at this point. We'd been married three years and life seemed, if not idyllic than certainly better than I'd anticipated. We didn't really have a lot in common other than an interest in him. He was easily even more narcissistic than I which, as you well know by now, is quite a feat. But still I was safe, warm and dry, with lots of entertainment if I wanted to arrange it and an unlimited budget for clothes and decorating and tending my horses. Plus, I had a secret I was excited to share, a secret sure to please the narcissist in any man.

The search for Wesley's starlet became all-consuming as it became more critical. Bogie's schedule filled up for the next six months. We needed a girl. Of course the inevitable happened. Wesley, after a hard day of watching beautiful starlets test, tossed the script in my lap and said, "You do it."

I let the script drop horrified. "Have you gone mad?" I asked.

"Look, you're the heroine. We both know it. In fact I bet Hem's writing a new book starring you and that goddamn marlin even as we speak. You know, The Blond and The Blue fish. So let's stop looking for someone like you and you do it. Warner'll agree to it, too. He already fancies you for himself."

I stared at him, speechless, formulating my answer. I suspect, until that moment, Wesley had thought my line about eschewing acting had simply been to pique his interest. Perhaps had I taken the chance, it may have been a new area in which our

relationship could expand. Or likelier he would have grown tired of me more quickly. Whatever the case, I was not, and would never be an actress. Wesley's view of actors was not all that different from Hitchcock's notorious comment: "Actors are sheep." Working for him as an actress definitely seemed like a step down.

"I can't," I replied grinning. "Sit down, I have something to tell you."

Do you think every wife prepares her husband in the same way? Looking at me sitting there patting the space beside me I want to just cry out at my naiveté. Silly foolish girl. I never did have a lick of sense about people. I guess that's because I never paid attention to anyone but myself. Still in my own defense I was rarely deliberately cruel.

He sat down as I asked. His eyes alight with expectation. I wonder what he thought I was going to say – "Honey I've looked into the California State law and polygamy is legal after all?" – I mean really. Anyway I stared into his eyes and went through with it.

"I wanted to wait to tell you, till I was farther along so there would be no concerns. I'm pregnant."

His face blanched. "Is it mine?" he asked quietly.

Horrified, I elbowed him in the gut.

Wesley fell back and clutched the arm of the sofa behind him. His eyes filled with anger. He held his stomach and rubbed it. "What the hell?" he managed, more shocked

than hurt. Then louder, “What the hell, Sunny? You’re damn lucky I won’t hit back,” he raised himself to his full height.

I stood up and walked to him, my chin at his throat, my heart clicking in my ears and challenged him. If I could handle my father when I was a child, I could easily handle Wesley Hayden. “Just try it,” I hissed. I’d taken on my father, killed a marlin and impressed the hell out of Hemingway, a damn sight more than Wesley had done lately. Let him come at me, the insulting bastard.

He put both hands on my shoulders and pushed me away. I stumbled, but did not fall on the couch behind me. The room was darkening with the setting sun. Shadows moved across Wesley’s face disguising his expression. I moved toward him and pressed close again.

“What kind of a woman do you think I am? Some whore from the studio? Whose baby do you think it is, Wesley? You think I’ve been fooling around on you? You think that’s a possibility? Why? Have you been? Are you judging by your own behavior?”

He walked out the door and left me to ponder my questions. He knew exactly what kind of woman I was, or at least he thought he did. I was the Hayden woman, and the Hayden woman does screw around, because she’s a cold, heartless bitch who belongs to no man. And she’s smart enough not to get pregnant while doing it.

Wesley not only created his own history for me, he believed his own creation. He didn’t see I wasn’t the Hayden woman, I just wore her clothes.

I began to cry.

The cook and housekeeper were off. No witnesses to our brawl. Calming down, I went to the fridge to pack some ice. My elbow throbbed. Wesley's gut was tougher than his character.

"You're lucky I wasn't armed." I said aloud to nobody in particular, nursing my elbow gingerly with an icepack. My poor body had been through too much over the past few months. My hands had barely recovered from the marlin, which I was getting sick of hearing about. Wesley twisted it into ammunition every time we disagreed. I suppose he felt peeved I could do this extraordinary thing for Hemingway, requiring talents I'd hidden from him.

Others could admire his taste, but not tamper with the creation. Silly fool. My own creation was the only thing I accomplished in life. Wesley can take credit for some of the seasoning, just as Hem, Bill and Christian all had a part in the recipe. Still I was chief chef. They just enhanced the product.

I took the product that was me out of the kitchen and sank down on the *chaise longue*. Where does this episode fit in the recipe? I loved Wesley, loved our life together. We met regularly with all the people that mattered in Hollywood, and many outside of Hollywood. We had parties, attended parties. Wesley had lots of friends that included us in every fun scheme. They were real friends too, people who didn't need to be cast in his next movie, people who he wouldn't hit up for financing. I had total freedom to ride my

horses and buy many more, if I wished. Even if we didn't have the cash to always pay for them, Wesley had a filmmaker's ability to charm for credit. We could pick up and go whenever we wanted.

I had liked the way Wesley saw me till now: smart, unfettered, witty and sexy. I was also rather embarrassed. The person I pictured myself to be - the 'California girl' Vreeland photographed - I don't think she went around punching men. She didn't lose her temper so violently. Would *she* apologize?

Wesley strode back in, interrupting my thoughts. He sat down beside me on the chaise longue where I'd retired to lick my wounds. It was now completely dark outside as well as in. Without turning on a light, he took the icepack and held it to my hand. "It looks like it really did hurt you more than it hurt me," he joked half-heartedly. "Sun, I didn't even know we were trying. You just kind of surprised me." His voice sounded kind, but his eyes were cold. He wasn't pleased. I could see that. He didn't want this baby. I could have made it better then I think, a conciliatory phrase, a kiss instead of any answer, but I didn't. I stood and took my hand back, opting for sarcasm.

"Sweetheart, don't make me explain the facts of life to you. Those Saturday afternoon contortions that find me with my legs splayed in the air and you short of breath, that's trying." That sounded more cruel than I intended. I quite liked our Saturday afternoon sessions. Certainly I was disappointed our lovemaking so quickly became routine. I often thought his Saturday afternoon erection was caused as much by the silver wall clock striking 2:00 as by my twenty-seven year old body. Wesley, for all his

attention to detail was an uninspired lover, a straight forward, break-and-enter kind of guy. He looked hurt. How far could I go, I wondered. I'd hit him, insulted his sexual prowess. Hell, I'd even flirted openly with Hem. Was he upset about the disruption a child would bring or was he afraid I wouldn't fulfill his ideal anymore? Every man I've ever met defined me through his worldview – Hem, Wesley, Tru – all except Christian.

“Gotta light?” I pulled a cigarette from my kimono with my free hand and held it to my lips.

“How pregnant are you?” he asked with a flick of the lighter. I cupped his hand and lit my cigarette.

“About six weeks I guess. I'm pretty regular.”

He looked away. Apparently the Hayden woman doesn't menstruate. He'd been holding my hand all this time, I pulled it away. Stood and walked to the French doors, opening them to let the smoke escape.

“So that gives us how long?” he lit another cigarette.

“Before the child is born and wrecks our lives? Is that what you're asking? Really Wesley a little pretence of pleasure wouldn't kill you.” Tears were stinging the corner of my eyes, not that I'd let him see it. This wasn't the response I'd anticipated. For someone as narcissistic as Wesley I expected a chance to imprint on a being from the beginning would be irresistible. In fact, it was the response I was counting on, because my own

feelings were so mixed. If Wesley, who was arguably my biggest fan, didn't think I could be a mother, then what the hell was I doing? "A baby is not generally considered a natural disaster," I added.

"Your words not mine," he replied. Wesley stood up and walked over to where I was standing. He stayed just behind me. "I just never really thought about having kids so soon, or actually at all. No offense Sunny, but you don't exactly come across as a maternal girl."

I turned slowly to face him, then turned away. "Except when I'm babysitting you and your buddies, you mean?"

The stars were barely visible in the navy sky, as if they were afraid to compete with the man-made kind. Not that I gave a damn about stars or space or any such distant concepts. I liked the here and now. Except for right now, that is.

"You know what I mean. When was the last time you cooed at a baby?" He walked around to face me. His charge was true, but unfair I think the last baby I ever cooed at was Henry, my little brother.

"When was the last time I saw a baby?" I retorted. "Our circle doesn't generally include the bassinet set." The scope of our conversation hit me. We had everything: money; power, at least in Hollywood terms; a kind of fame; and a home of more square footage than two people could ever use. Sadness pushed my shoulders down. This, what we were doing right now, was the marriage part - this reconciling of ideas of what family

was. What our life together amounted to. Up till now, I realized, we'd only been dating, and under the best circumstances. Here we were in a place where the depth of our feelings for each other should've seen us through. Yet there was no depth. We lacked the love for a baby. I scarred my cigarette against the ashtray, turned away. I had no road map out of this mess. I'd never really had one before, but now there wasn't just me to consider. I couldn't just take off to Death Valley or hang out at San Simeon. My whole body shook. I stopped, and looked back at him.

"Still, Wesley, I'm going to be somebody's mother." I let the tears roll down my cheeks. Wesley walked over and put his arms around me. I looked up at him, not sure what I wanted to see.

"But I don't want to be somebody's father." He spoke softly – as if the tone could nullify the sense.

"Do you still want to be somebody's husband?" I whispered, hating myself for asking the question, for the weakness it implied. The Hayden woman is always self-assured.

"I love you," he replied. "If that's what you're asking. But my life won't stop because of a baby. I'm forty-seven. My projects last six months from conception to completion. That's how I like it. You never brought up the subject of children before – I assumed, like me, you didn't want any. We have a terrific life, don't we? Look at this house you created – it's sensational. And the fun - we can go anywhere at any time. You

love to travel, catch fish with Hemingway. We have a wonderful life. We'll work on this movie together. You could be the lead." He still didn't know me, really why should he? I hadn't really shown him anything but what he wanted to see. Maybe that's all there was to me anyway.

He pulled back a bit and held my hands. "You don't have to have this baby," he said quietly. "I know people . . . the studios regularly arrange for. . ." And for the second time in as many hours I hit him - this time with my fist. He didn't protest. He left.

I had a ring on my finger and a baby in my stomach. That was the way it was supposed to be. I had played by the rules. There would be no abortion this time. I would not lie in Agnes's back room and bleed for two days. I simply would not. He would come around.

Four months pregnant, I was the elephant in my own rooms. The atmosphere in our home had changed overnight. Wesley and I didn't refer to my growing belly; we didn't speak of the nursery or of the things expectant couples discuss. He was often away. Rumors reached my ears about his newly activated casting couch. Dear Bill Powell assured me the gossip was untrue. But I knew. The usual ways one knows: girlish voices calling at all hours of the night, lingerie shops mixing up delivery addresses. Still, I couldn't bear to ask Wesley. I wouldn't shame myself. I was more embarrassed than hurt by it really. I was worried what others would think of me. Would they say I could not satisfy him? For

all my airs I was not terrifically sophisticated. If I confronted him, I'd need to leave I assumed and I had nowhere to go. So we ignored my stomach and his whoring.

In spite of the whoring, or perhaps because of it, I began to get excited about the baby. I imagined a tow-headed boy nestled in my arms, his eyes dark blue and vague. I would name him after Henry. Even Wesley would come around, when he saw us together, Madonna and child, peaceful in the glow of California sun, snuggled in fine linen sheets. I imagined Henry in little sailor suits. Then in miniature cowboy costumes, I'd teach him how to ride. Like shooting, riding came easily to me.

I went to the library and checked out a bunch of horse books because while I could ride a horse like nobody's business, I knew nothing about the care of them. I wanted my son and I to have the stables as our special place. I would teach him to be passionate about them and then I would grow more passionate too. I began to a sense of purpose - strange for a girl like me. No matter what, he would always love me. I was his mother, boys always loved their mothers. It was mandated somewhere.

I was barely showing, but dressed unnecessarily in my newly-made maternity clothes anyway. One of the studio girls had designed a beautiful maternity wardrobe in navy and ivory linen and gabardine. The clothes were so pretty I could hardly wait to wear them. No embroidered ducks for me. It has been a constant theme in my life that I can get excited about anything, albeit briefly, if I have the right clothes. I've never understood the childlike impulse to array one's bloated, bulbous self in pastel-hued woodland critters. I've actually never understood the woodland critter and newborn link

at all. Presumably if a critter came across a newborn baby in the woodland, he would eat it. I actually felt sexier in my first trimester than at any other time in my marriage. For one thing, I finally had breasts, really lovely ones. I'd always had very pretty nipples, now they had something to crest on. I also had a small stomach curve where there was only concavity before. I felt womanly.

Wesley, when he was home, seemed to notice too, occasionally startling me with a mid-week romp. I felt for sure he would come around. How could he not when faced with a beautiful, blond son. My brother Henry had been so pretty, my mother was regularly detained so a passerby could glean full pleasure from his angelic glow. And this would be his son, his immortality. The Hayden name would continue, perhaps little Henry would be a filmmaker like his father... On and on I daydreamed, planning and foolishly hoping.

Wesley's mother didn't know I was pregnant until she and Mutti arrived for Mother's Day Brunch. Wesley celebrated the high holidays with his mother - Christmas, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day and his birthday. Beyond that they talked on the phone occasionally. A cold woman in her own right, she was nonetheless nonplussed at how little attention Wesley bestowed on his wife and unborn child. I was treated with more concern by Kiko, our new manservant. Bill and his new wife Diana found Kiko for me when he realized that Wesley expected his late night poker games and cocktail parties to proceed full tilt. Mother, conversely, visited regularly now – the idea of her impending grandson loomed large and happy in her mind. She never spoke it aloud, but I know she

too was hoping for a boy to make up for the one we'd lost. He would call her Nana and she would brick up the fireplaces in my home.

Kiko and I arranged for Mother's Day brunch in the sunroom, my last mother's day as a child. We opened the French doors to the patio wide. A typical blue-gold California day and the Hollow glittered. Pennies of light bounced off the crystal and silver on our breakfast table. Kiko filled glass globes with purple tulips and coordinated the linens to match. I slid the new French singer Edith Piaf on the turntable and turned it loud. Her rough, emotional voice masked the gaps of emotion in my home. A simple menu: Eggs Benedict, fresh strawberries, scones, Devonshire cream, strong Cuban coffee and a pitcher of Mimosas to keep the conversation flowing. One thing was missing. Kitty breezed in looking fresh and lovely in a maroon and white striped dress. With a matching spring coat draped upon her shoulders. Wesley hadn't managed to monochromize her .

"Darling Sunny, where is Wesley? I can't believe he didn't tell me you were expecting," she embraced me, her hand fluttered briefly to my stomach. Then she shook her head. "That boy of mine." Kiko took her coat, and my mother came over to kiss the air beside Kitty's well-defined cheekbones.

"He probably wanted to surprise you, Kitty," my mother replied for me. She led Kitty to the tea wagon laden with an arrangement of Mimosas.

Kitty plucked a champagne glass from the wagon and turned to me. "How far along are you my dear? Is everything all right? You do look a little pale." She touched

my chin lightly with her hand.

“I’m four months, Kitty, and yes everything’s fine.” I sat down on the sofa and patted the seat beside me. Everything was fine, except, of course, the smell of the Eggs Benedict seemed suddenly strong. “Wesley should be here any minute. He worked late last night and stayed at the studio. You know how obsessed he gets with his movies.”

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Kitty pursed her lips, but said nothing against her son, instead she sat down beside me began talking about the baby, excitement lighting her blue eyes. She and Mutti were soon planning the layette, the schools, and the clubs.

Kiko readied another Champagne bottle just in case. When the clock chimed twelve, we were soused and famished. My nausea mercifully passed. No sign of Wesley, so we headed to the table to talk more baby talk. It felt great to indulge in some good, sentimental women talk. Again I regretted my lack of female friends. Why did I have no female friends? Laziness I guess, Marion and I hardly spoke and I didn’t bother to try. Story of my life – I didn’t bother to try. I always seemed to place more importance on men - gay or straight - they were the where the action was.

“When do you begin construction on the nursery, my dear?” Kitty asked as she spooned lavish amounts of Devonshire cream on her scone.

“I thought the baby would sleep with me, at first,” I said. “I haven’t really thought beyond that,” I tried to sound casual, but panic fluttered in my ribcage. I really hadn’t thought about how the baby would physically fit into our home.

“Nonsense, the baby needs to be close to the nanny. You have got a nanny’s quarters don’t you?”

I popped a bit of scone into my mouth to avoid answering and looked helplessly at my mother. She was no help whatsoever.

“She’s right darling,” she said. “You’ll need a full-time nanny. You don’t want to be stuck at home tending to the baby all the time. That’s just not you, Abby.” Everyone had an idea of who I was and what kind of mother I would be.

“But won’t I want to be with him?” I protested. When I look back at how naïve I was, really, what was I thinking? I honestly thought I could handle a baby on my own. The accomplishment of my life thus far had been conquering a fish and punching my husband and here I planned to mother a baby. Luckily mother and Kitty saw through that. “I guess I will need a nanny of some kind.”

“A wet nurse,” my mother pronounced. “You certainly don’t want to wreck your bosom, my girl.”

“No, absolutely not. A girl like you, well, frankly you *are* your looks my dear. You must do your best to preserve them as long as possible. And as for my son, well, I think it’s time he learned to come home, don’t you?” Kitty glanced at my mother.

“What do you propose I do?” I asked, twisting the tablecloth in my lap. Even my own mother seemed swayed by Kitty’s domineering ways. ‘You are your looks . . .’ just a

few years later I'd have volleyed back a smart comment like "At least I'm that, dear Kitty, what's your claim?" But then, I just listened, impotent.

"Stop catering to him for one thing," Mutti replied – as if I'd arranged for the tartlet he was currently fondling. She signaled to Kiko that she'd like a second helping of Eggs Benedict.

"Oh me too, Kiko," Kitty nodded, then to me said, "Let him know my grandchild is a fact he can't ignore."

"I assumed my waistline would take care of that," I tried to smile. I caught Kiko's eye. I was clearly not drunk enough to endure their candor. "More orange juice, Kiko, please." This little brunch had taken a turn for me. At their every utterance I grew angrier, at them, at Wesley, at myself for being so ineffective.

Next, I did the indulgent thing. I took their advice. The actions you regret most are the actions proposed by others.

"What do you have in mind?"

"It's time to renovate!" Kitty replied. "Not a moment to waste. Once Wesley sees the nursery he will not be able to ignore what is happening at all."

"At all," my mother parroted. A drunken bond had been forged. Champagne before noon – the great uniter. I think mother felt out of her depth here. Even she, my

biggest fan, was surprised by my quick rise in the world: dinners with Bogart, vacations with Hemingway. She didn't want it to disappear. She was star-struck.

"Trust me, this is a big house; if Wesley wants to avoid the nursery all he has to do is go to his office." I was a bit disappointed in these conspiring doyennes. I was expecting a grander solution than a home décor project.

"Not if his office becomes the nursery," Kitty replied deadpan.

I burst out laughing. Mother joined in.

"That is rich," I felt a bit better. A sense of humor can stave off anything, even what Tru would famously term the 'Mean Reds.' I could just picture Wesley's face - his beautiful wood-paneled office, painted pale blue with white trim. The animal trophies replaced with pastel-hued teddy bears, kittens and ducks.

I rationalized easily, a lifelong trait. Wesley could stop the renovation at any time. All he had to do was return home and put an end to it. He would have noticed – I have yet to meet a tidy workman. But, he did not come. So I dwelled on his solution to our baby. Renovation seemed more desirable with each passing hour. Revenge? Yes. Petty? Of course. Apologies? Bah!

When Wesley finally returned home, a week and a brand new nursery later, he was contrite and gift-laden. I nestled in my usual spot by the fireplace, needle pointing yet another pillow for the nursery. You've guessed by now I am not a sentimental

woman, but I was not immune to the hormones raging through my body in the second trimester of my pregnancy. So as I sat there, sewing “Children make a Family” or some such rot, I was teary. Ridiculous how weak I was. I heard Wesley’s car and dabbed my eyes.

“I’m in here,” I called. My stomach lurched.

He walked in sheepishly. I despised him. If you are going to be a cad, at least have the balls to be a complete cad. Then he handed me yellow tulips, my favorite, and yes - wait for it - a tiny Harry Winston box. My regret soured into disgust. Here I was a beautiful, 27-year-old wife; five month’s pregnant with his baby. And here he was, the playboy husband, bearing flowers and baubles from a rendezvous on the other side of the country – Winston’s was in New York.

“Darling, how lovely. They will go beautifully in the nursery,” I laughed.

“Nursery?” he repeated. He was wary, I could tell by his eyes. He had no idea what to expect. That was one of the many problems in our marriage and really with his movies. He never understood emotional subtext. It was all on the surface for him. Something, I suspect, he thought we shared.

I sat staring at his lanky figure, dashing in the usual yachting get-up.

“Aren’t you going to open your surprise?” he nodded to the pitch-blue box. It was all about him again. Since I obviously wasn’t angry about his absence the least I could do

was acknowledge his generosity. Ignoring the fact, of course, that this fling of his must have cost us a fortune. This little boxed gesture alone indicated he'd flown to New York and back. Images of his excursion flashed in my mind. He'd have played big-shot director, which probably involved the first trip to Harry Winston as thank you for getting her between the sheets at the Plaza – Wesley never did sordid hotels. His fear of fleas out-weighed his fear of discovery. Then, a second 'thank you' trip, this time to me for keeping the home fires burning.

"I think you'll like it," he prompted me. I toyed with the box. I stood with his help and called to Kiko. Kiko was right there. He'd been eavesdropping, as all good servants must. He bowed to Wesley in greeting. "Good afternoon, Mr. Hayden."

"Kiko," Wesley nodded tersely.

"Kiko, please arrange these in the square Waterford vase, place them in the nursery and bring Mr. Hayden his bourbon," I paused. "The bottle, Kiko."

"I'm not really thirsty, Sunny," he protested

"Oh, you will be. Come with me."

"Open your surprise."

"I thought we'd open our surprises together," I wore my best, wicked grin. Earlier, when Wesley phoned to tell me he'd finished his project and would be back today, I'd had Kiko put a blue bow on the double doors to Wesley's office. Covering the

short distance to the nursery, Wesley stopped in his tracks when he saw the bow. I watched the realization darken his complexion. He was piecing it together – my amiable temper, the frequent mentions of the nursery, surprise.

“What have you done?”

“Nothing as damning as you, Dearest.” I reached for the door handle, opening the door with the flourish my girth would allow. “Surprised?”

He looked at me in disbelief, and repeated what would become his mantra in our marriage. “Abigail, I am not amused. You have no right!” He actually shouted.

I drew myself up, squared my shoulders and vowed never to be caught again in a dramatic scene without high heels. Forcing my anger into sarcasm, I whispered, “And you Wesley you are not amusing. I consider that a character flaw. And this, this is not right.” I held up the unopened box. “Not acceptable.”

His eyes narrowed to slits. He spoke quietly. “What are you saying, Abigail?” Daring me to challenge him - to make the accusation.

“I am saying whatever this is - it is not *big* enough.” I backed off. A plan came to me quickly. I was desperately provincial. Adultery, I thought, signaled the end of my marriage. I hadn’t accepted it was already dead. If I challenged him and he admitted it, I’d have to leave. I had no idea how ubiquitous adultery was then, naively. I decided to get out on my own terms and with something to show for it.

“Dinner will be at eight, the Nivens are coming. I’ve also invited Bogie and Mayo. I’m going to call Harry now, to exchange this for a bauble worthy of the Hayden woman.”

“You bitch.”

“Feeling a little Dr. Frankenstein’sh darling?” I blew him a kiss and dashed to the door. My heart thrummed in my chest. I was sure I would throw up. Closing the door, I left.

Chapter Eleven

What a little fool. How differently I would have handled things later - taking Wesley up on his abortion for one. An unwanted child is a burden to all. And Cecily did end up being unwanted. I didn't want a girl. We could have still had good fun together. Perhaps if he'd shown a modicum of interest in Cecily we could have made it work. I operate well with an example. My poor mother was useless. She was a terrific mother, but Cecily being a girl was quite a blow to her. To both of us. It was like losing Henry all over again. We expected to be reunited with a child we already knew and loved. We expected little Henry all perfect and pink and instead we received a colicky brown-haired girl whose skin was the color of raw hamburger.

New York hit me like a tonic – an intoxicating gin and tonic, light on the ice. I had withdrawn a wad of pin money on my way to the airport. My checkbook, I reserved for serious expenses. My room was booked at the Pierre - I was still so young – this was before I'd developed my preference for the Upper West Side. I suppose I had some romantic idea that Wesley would come to his senses while I was gone and realize how much the baby and I meant to him. My ill-conceived journey had taken me four harrowing days and three nights by train. The only boon was I was able to get a berth on short notice because of my condition. Air travel was restricted because of the war. Before

the war and gas rationing I'd known a ton of people who'd flown from L.A. to New York regularly.

The trip was luxurious if excruciatingly long. The Super Chief was a beautiful train, containing lots of white jacketed waiters and a parlor car with a massive arched sun window. At night I lay on my lower berth staring out the curtained window at the black night, letting the rumble and motion overpower my troubled thoughts. In Chicago I changed to the Twentieth Century Limited, in for a penny, in for a pound at that point I guess – Harry Winston's was my destination. Life is too short to spend second guessing decisions, no matter how erratic. The kindly waiters brought me sufficient cold vodkas to sop away the cares of Southern California.

Finally arriving at Grand Central I made my way to the taxi stand and was again given priority due to my prominent belly (posture makes all the difference). Once in the cab I felt anything but delicate.

"The Pierre, please," I ordered the cabbie. The Pierre is the gorgeous 1920's skyscraper capped with copper I'd stayed in with Marion. Harry Winston would have to wait until later. Tonight I would enjoy a quiet night with room service and glorious southeast views of Central Park. Each room was different, but conveyed a cozy feel with floral designs and silk wall tapestries. I didn't plan to just sleep there but rather cocoon. And tomorrow, maybe tomorrow I'd sleep late and treat myself to tea in the Rotunda. Would Wesley be mad with worry, I wondered. Certainly the dinner party would have been an ordeal for him. But Kiko directed it with ease, no doubt.

The next morning I set out for Bergdorf's for a change of clothes. One wrinkled set of west-coast togs would not do for New York. Fully attired I taxied to 525 Fifth Ave, where Harry hawked his glitter. Every step I took seemed more confident than the last. This city infused me with spring and energy. So what if Wesley was a bastard, I didn't need him or his California. It was, maybe, the first time I considered life without him, in the abstract anyway. New York, I love it so. No place in the world helped me think clearer. California was lush and lovely, but it wasn't my home, not my heart's home. Somehow the worn brown brick, dull pavement and clusters of humanity made me feel less lonesome and more real than the pristine house I'd practically designed for Wesley and myself. New York is at once intimate and impersonal, just like me.

Harry Winston and I had met moons ago through Marion. Small in stature, big in personality, he acted more impresario than retailer. I found him fascinating. By the forties he was known as the *King of Diamonds*, though he was only in his early thirties. His ability to spot gems was legendary. Once, as a boy, he spotted a ring in a store window amid a cluster of pretty paste pieces. His already astute eye knew an emerald when he saw one. Winston bought the ring for 25 cents and re-sold it for serious cash. His store was whisper quiet. I stood on one side of a glass case gazing with indifference at the loose diamonds he'd brought out for my review. Feeling renewed in my Bergdorf ensemble, I dismissed his sparklers.

"Darling, they are just so pale, so non-descript. Call me a philistine, but truly, hand me a big fat rhinestone and it does the job – in *all* its white glory."

Harry shook his dark head. “Oh Sunny,” he admonished, “So I guess the gift from Wesley didn’t go over well?” He eyed me carefully. I wondered, was I wrong? Perhaps this gift was the only one Wesley bought from Winston’s, perhaps he wasn’t so brazen to buy gifts for his whore and his wife from the same jeweler. Not naturally confessional, I wasn’t about to let the jeweler in on my marital troubles, if he didn’t suspect. And if he did suspect, what recourse did I have but dignity and denial?

“Harry, sweetheart, you’ll think me a wretch, but I know Wesley’s taste and I couldn’t bring myself to open it.”

Harry’s eyes widened briefly. He was a very proper, always perfectly attired in a black suit white shirt and black tie. Fastidiously groomed, he was the picture of the careful jeweler.

“Oh don’t get me wrong: He’s a dream with clothes, furs, mostly everything else, it’s just,” and here I gambled and guessed, “It’s just diamonds. I loathe plain old boring diamonds.”

“What did Wesley say?” Harry could be an impertinent gossip at times. It was really none of his business. Still, I’d started this charade.

“Oh he was furious of course. I feel just awful. I simply can’t wear them, they make me feel ancient.” And cast aside.

“My goodness, I hope his mother doesn’t feel that way too. Her brooch was a diamond cluster.” Harry replied. Was that a calculating look in his eyes? Did he know there was no way in hell Wesley brought a goddamn brooch for his mother? Damn Wesley for putting me in this position.

“No, she’ll love it. You know the type, a bit arriviste - diamonds at breakfast.” I made a face.

“Indeed, I do know the type. Those delightful women are the cornerstone of my business.” Harry laughed. Then getting back to business, he walked behind his gleaming glass case. “Well, my dear Mrs. Hayden let us fix this right now, because you certainly aren’t ancient, and if it’s color you need, then we simply must do a little research. Not all diamonds are colorless, my dear, in fact some of the rarest, most expensive diamonds in the world have soft hues – pinks, yellows, greens, grays, even orange.”

“Orange?”

“Yes they are actually darker Canary yellow diamonds; some refer to them as marmalade. A fun, little stone.”

“Yes, a bit too English breakfast for my taste. Tell me about the Canary diamonds, are they really, very yellow?” No one in my set had colored diamonds, a thought that appealed to me immensely. I liked being an original and I was due to begin my important jewelry collection. “May I see one?”

“If you would like.” Harry seemed reluctant. He could be possessive over his gems.

He motioned for me to follow him. Back in his private office, he opened his wall safe and removed a blue velvet tray topped with a handkerchief. He picked up a stone with the handkerchief and placed the tray back in the safe and closed it. I remained silent. In Harry’s world, these glittery bits took on a solemnity no amount of irreverence could puncture.

“Please sit down Mrs. Hayden; you are in for a treat.” He picked up his silver jewel tongs, gently secured his prize from the linen and held an ember-like stone out to me.

“Sunshine,” was all I could say.

Wordlessly Harry took back the unopened box and three days later provided me with a new one in its stead. It contained a lovely gold cocktail ring whose Canary diamond was circled by lesser pale ones. Captivating as the California sun.

Delighted with my purchase and my meeting with Harry, I celebrated by treating myself to lunch. The place to go was the Colony. I strode through the door, right into

Christian Marcus; the Hemingway agent. He shook his companion's hand, and then set his full attention on me.

"Miss Sunsky, well you are a sight." Christian did a wonderful impression of Hem, complete with earnest swagger. "What a surprise, I had no idea you were in town. You and Wesley will have to join me." Christian's hand lingered on my arm. The Hemingway deal must have paid well for him too. The diners looked up at us for a few minutes inquiringly then resumed the business of dining.

"Wesley's in L.A., I just dropped by to do some shopping."

Christian appraised me from head to toe. "That must be some list you've got. Anyway, you're here now and I've spotted you so you're stuck with me. Let's go to my table."

I nodded my acquiescence. He led me to my seat.

Christian's white lined table was the worst in the house. It sat right by the kitchen, and formerly would only be sat in by tourists or the clueless. Christian was neither, he simply enjoyed the mingling of aromas – gravy, cheeses and crisp coffee whisked together like faint clouds to form a rainbow of scent that was as familiar as home. He ate there every day and even had a private phone line installed so he could conduct business over lunch. He was the perpetual communicator. His handsome head always bent over telephone, a wire or letter - it was all the same to him. All around him, the restaurant would be humming along, business brisk and efficient, white aprons snapping,

soufflés cresting – and his legion of acquaintances shyly waving or boldly interrupting whatever communiqué he was executing. He would actually write someone a letter, mail it, and then call the person to tell him to expect it. Or better yet, wire them that he was going to call them. Completely mad, but earnest and adorable too. For this lunch he did the unprecedented -- had the telephone removed and focused on me entirely. Because we were right by the kitchen, they just tucked it in the doorway, instead of disconnecting it. I'm sure he must have strained something, but he managed to ignore the incessant ringing and make me feel like I was the most fascinating creature in the world by doing something few men did, at least after they knew the important stuff – marital status and measurements – he asked questions. He wanted to know my thoughts on plays, books, world events. Did I really care about the men fighting? Or war bonds? Did I think that Carole Lombard had a premonition of her death? Silly stuff, serious stuff, he wanted me to have opinions. The only opinions Wesley generally cared about were those of his work. And truly, dissenting opinions weren't all that well-received. Who could blame him really, I suppose, he was the genius.

The phone chimed with the regularity of a colicky baby, interrupting my thoughts with each ring. "Really go ahead," I nodded in the direction of the offending apparatus, "Get that, truly, I don't care in the least."

"I may be busy, but I'm not blind. I would never ignore a beautiful tourist for a metal box. Now tell me everything, why are you here?"

"I told you, shopping and, of course, I miss New York," I replied truthfully.

“You’re not from here though – according to Mrs.Vreeland you are the quintessential California girl – definitely not a New Yorker.”

“Carmel Snow and Diana have been kind enough to take a train to California photograph me a few times, usually when New York is enjoying a blizzard. I suspect they like the California weather as much as any California style.” I bunny-eared my fingers when I said the word style. The smells emanating from the kitchen were tantalizing. My stomach, and baby, were starting to protest our long lunch less day.

“What does Wesley think of you being here all alone?” His eyes twinkled naughtily. His eyes were a semi-precious shade of blue, alert and playful. My stomach gave a flutter I couldn’t attribute to the baby. He was such fun and so sexy that I felt sexy too. I regarded him sternly, “I will not answer one more question, Mr.Marcus until there is food on our table. I’m beginning to think you invited me to your table under false pretenses. I suppose it’s my fault, I didn’t actually hear you offer lunch.

He grinned and called over the waiter. “Two beef stews please,” he looked at me quickly, “You’re not vegetarian are you?” I shook my head. “Good, and a bottle of Haut-Brion, you pick the vintage. Thanks Clark,” he nodded to the waiter.

“Beef stew?” I questioned skeptically and smoothed my napkin on my lap. I hadn’t been given a menu.

“Hey this is a rare treat, don’t knock it till you try it. They don’t normally serve it to civilians.” He shot me a meaningful look, and then his face cracked into a grin that captured me in its warmth. Heady stuff, diamonds then this.

“Are they afraid of law suits?” I teased. He was truly adorable.

“Funny,” he replied. “It’s what they serve the staff for lunch. One night I was here after hours with a buddy. We were starving and begged for some kitchen scraps. This is what they served us,” he smiled brightly, obviously very pleased with himself. “I’ve had it every day, ever since.”

“Every day,” my eyes grew wide, “Mr. Marcus, you sure know how to show a girl a good time. Kitchen scraps, indeed.” I pretended I was put out.

“You don’t do coy very well, Mrs. Hayden.”

“Sure I do, I’m just out of practice.”

He reached over and held my hand with mock sincerity, “Anything I can do to help?” He was such a foolish charmer.

“Yes,” I rasped waspishly, “Feed me.” The table next to ours had just been served with something swimming in fragrant gravy, it was all I could do not to rip the plate bodily from the waiter’s hands. Christian turned to see where I was gazing to so hungrily.

“Oh for goodness sake, I’m forgetting,” He swiveled to find our waiter, “Clark,” he called, “Bring the pretty lady some breadsticks please, before she starts assaulting your real clientele.” He looked expectantly at me, “Now, the basic needs are taken care of, tell me all, I must know everything.”

“No, my turn, Mr. Marcus, don’t you get tired of having the same dish every single day. Don’t you long to try something new?”

He considered my question for awhile. “I have sampled a variety of dishes, here and abroad. In fact, I misspent my youth tasting widely and loving the adventure. And really nothing is to stop me from sampling again. I just don’t want to. I do a lot of research and when I find the real deal I stick to it.”

“What about the anticipation of something new, unexperienced?”

“Once when I was in Paris, I ate sea urchin. I ordered it just for the sake of something different. I could hardly anticipate or even salivate, after all I had no concept what I about to taste.”

I made a face. “And what was the result?”

“Well the waiter came out, carrying a silver dish with six sea urchins cut in half. They formed tiny bowls with lids. In each bowl was a soupy concoction of coconut milk and spices, I suppose to take the edge off the urchin flavor.”

“Well was it ghastly?”

“Nope, delicious. Utterly delicious.” He grinned triumphantly. “Which proves my point.”

I shook my head, “No it doesn’t at all. If it was delicious, it would make sense then to continue to try new and wonderful things.”

“On the contrary. I faced the prospect of the sea urchins with such trepidation that I barely enjoyed them as I was eating them. Rather than pleasure, I experienced relief. Whereas when I have my beef stew, from the moment I arrive at the front door of this place my mouth begins to salivate because I know exactly what to expect. I know it will be amazing. Routine doesn’t have to be boring, it can be delightfully comforting. For example, I am not at all thinking about whether we will enjoy our meal. Instead I get to focus on you.”

I shifted in my chair. His gaze was intense, and not mocking anymore. “Well, to begin with, I’m married, Mr. Marcus.”

“Mmm, me too,” he smiled. “Will you go to the Stork Club tonight?” Attendance at the Stork Club was society’s role call in 1944.

“No, no. I haven’t really told anybody I’m here. I just arrived yesterday.”

“I suppose you think it would be inappropriate since you’re in the family way, not that anyone can tell.” His blue eyes sparked with a challenge.

I couldn't resist. "I don't give a damn about the appropriateness. I just think it would be a bore to go unescorted." So he noticed, I thought. I now felt a bit disappointed I was showing.

"Excellent, I shall be your escort for tonight."

It was good to be back in the company of an admiring man. I had no idea that this boyish, 40-something man would soon be my husband and *the* love of my life. I didn't get to wear my sunshine ring to dinner; it wouldn't be ready till three days later. But I shared the story with Christian that night, the whole story – I got a bit deep in my cups. It never failed to amuse him - it was my first and last foray into 'Important' jewellery. Lord knows he tried to ply me with a trove of it later. It turns out, I hate the stuff. Just loathe it – it gets in the way of all the things I'd begun to enjoy while married to Wesley - hunting, riding, shopping, and sex.

Chapter Twelve

My escape to New York produced the desired effect - at least, for a short time. I returned after being gone a total of two and a half weeks to a contrite Wesley who professed to adore my outsized bauble. We forged an uneasy truce, helped by my discovery of his Cinderella weeks after my return. She was hiding in plain sight - in the glossies. There are few things in this life as soothing as expensive, shiny, magazines. I subscribed to them all: Bazaar, Vogue, Glamour, McCall's, and Life. In fact, one of the things that made my time in the English countryside bearable was Her Majesty's seductive, oversized mags - that and Irish stable boys.

One night, alone in my bedroom, I poured myself a sherry and collected a clutch of old issues from the basket in our *en suite*. Their tidy pages spilled open on the bedspread. Harper's Bazaar opened right to the double-page spread showcasing a fresh blond with full lips smoldering in a simple blouse. Alongside one page was printed: "Worn by the young actress, Betty Becall" (her name was spelled wrong I later discovered; Vreeland never cared about those kinds of details.) She wasn't even nineteen in that photo, yet conveyed a sexy knowingness. If she could act - hell even if she couldn't, she was certainly worth seeing. I flipped through the other issues of Bazaar, assuming Vreeland would use her again and again. There she was, this time on March's cover. Betty Bacall stood, a challenge in front of an American Red Cross Blood Donor Services door. Her gaze was level and imploring.

“I think she’s the one.” I placed the March 1943 issue of Bazaar on the breakfast table opposite Wesley’s carafe of coffee. His eyes flickered from his current issue of Photoplay to my ‘find.’

“Sunny,” he started, excited, looking up, “She’s great, that’s the look, your look, all clean and fair but not icy, rather . . . capable-looking.” He finished. He looked at the date. “This ran four months ago, which means it was probably photographed seven months ago.” He was talking to himself more than me. “Who should I call?” He muttered.

“Diana,” I responded. Diana Vreeland had included me in her west coast fashion shoots as a high profile young wife last year. I enjoyed the idea that Wesley could use my contacts for once.

But I’d already lost his interest. “I’ll get Max on it right away.” Max Steingart was his agent and partner.

“Great.” My voice was cool. He didn’t appear to notice.

Betty Bacall would’ve emerged sooner or later. I am, however, credited with discovering her. To the publicity guys, I was a good angle to pump - the fashionable wife of a famous Hollywood director plucking an unknown from the pages of a magazine. In reality, both Columbia and David O. Selznick’s office sent letters to Bazaar inquiring

about her before Wesley did. It was Max, Wesley's partner that got on the best with Betty's uncle Jack, the unofficial patriarch of Betty's family. Now she would play the leading lady in a major motion picture. Her leading man was to be her future husband and compatriot in one of Hollywood's greatest real-life love stories. Bogie, twenty years her senior and smitten, got Betty's role expanded, then handed her the whole picture.

My main contribution came when Wesley began shooting in February, 1944. Our baby Cecily was just six months old. I was the model for Betty's character in *To Have and Have Not*. Wesley became interested in everything I said. I'm not sure how screenwriters Jules Furthman and William Faulkner (yes, that same William Faulkner – everyone was working in movies then, the money was grand) felt about Wesley's constant revisions of the girl character. It got to the point where Wesley stopped beating around the bush, and would simply read me one of Bogie's lines and ask me what I would say. Furthman suggested I get screen credit because so much of the material is mine. Remember the whistle line? "You know how to whistle, don't you? Just put your lips together and blow," or "No matter how bad it is, don't apologize for it; there it is, take it or leave it." That of course is my maxim, the movie cemented that. Life influencing art influencing life. It wasn't Hem, Faulkner or Furthman who lived that, I did.

Wesley signed Betty for the film, put her under contract and gave me half ownership. Not only did she look like a thoroughbred, she was now owned like one. Just

like me. Funny even though I decided I didn't want to be an actress, I still felt under contract. And soon that contract was doomed to expire, even sooner than I thought.

Chapter Thirteen

By the time Wesley's movie with Bacall was in the can, it was 1945. My marriage was done. Then mother died. She was only sixty-five, but her stroke was swift and lethal. Wesley was unbelievably kind that morning.

"Sun, sweetheart, Sunny." He shook my shoulder gently. I looked up at him, startled. His voice was so tender. The mellow, scent of jasmine tea rose from my night table. In the distance I heard the baby crying, she was always crying, the wretch. I pushed myself up against the pillows and Wesley handed me my teacup. He would hardly wake me up for this, he barely acknowledged his daughter. Neither one of us bothered with her. She was a disappointment from the start - a girl, a dreadful, brown colicky girl. I looked at him curiously. He looked sad, his mouth skewed to one side.

"Something happened late last night," he said quietly. "Margaret had a stroke and died in her sleep."

"Mutti?" I said stupidly, not processing his words. He reached out and pulled me into his arms. For the first time in a year, I found comfort there.

"Where is she?" I asked, my head muffled against his shoulder.

"I called Pierce Brothers this morning. They're bringing her there. We can go over as soon as you're dressed."

I struggled out of bed. “Who found her?” I hated the thought of her dying alone. In a perfect world you should get to say good-bye to at least one person you’ve loved before you go.

“Nancy, when she brought her morning tea.” Wesley and I had recently arranged for mother to have some help around the house.

Wesley took me to her at the funeral home and cancelled all his appointments for the next few days. He crafted all the arrangements.

Mother’s funeral. I was in black, of course. My head is covered. From my vantage point of death, I can see my twenty-seven year old self clearly, as well as things that were veiled by my grief that day. I am shaking and looking very fragile. But my eyes are dry. Wesley’s hand is on my elbow.

I can see it all so clearly. The gauzy veil that I’ve labored under since being here in hell has been momentarily lifted. My eyes just want to soak in the sights, even if it is Mutti’s funeral. The people, the clothes, how pretty the church looks – oh, I have missed pretty. I never realized how much I relied on scenery in my life. I loved beautiful things and places and people. I may not have accomplished a damn thing but I did contribute to the prettiness of the world. My rooms were lovely and my clothes were well tailored. Oh how long will this last – I now feel I could look forever at these images. I looked so

lovely. I should have looked in the mirror more. I love looking on my face. And there's Bill, I had forgotten he was there.

Bill Powell is in the corner speaking with an adolescent. How odd. Wesley's current leading lady arrives late and slips in the back pew. That bastard, at Mutti's funeral - I didn't realize he needed comforting too. Wesley winks at the young starlet and nods, indicating he'll be with her shortly, I suppose. Larcenous bastard. Marion is there. Hem telegraphed. Bazaar and Vogue sent flowers. The Selznicks, Shipwreck Kelly, Brenda Frazier, and so many Hollywood people, it is attended like a Hollywood funeral. I had no idea how powerful Wesley was then. Truman, what is Truman doing there? Bill is talking to Truman, not some boy; but in 1945, I didn't know Truman. He would only have been about 20. He looks 14 and would have still been living with his mother at 1060 Park Avenue. What is he doing in California, attending my mother's funeral? Being dead has its rewards. I begin to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"I don't believe we've met." Bill looks suspicious.

"No we haven't. I, of course, know you. I've enjoyed you for years." Truman laughs, pausing, "Cinematically speaking, of course." Tru often used his homosexuality as a litmus test - to see who he could make flinch. Of course, Bill doesn't, Hollywood's always had its share of queers and queens.

"I am Truman Capote - the writer." His eyes twinkle, as if he's just shared an intimate quip.

"What do you write Mr. Capote, tales from the grave?"

“As a matter of fact, some of my work has been called macabre. I write short stories and I am working on a novel for Bennett Cerf at Random House.” Of course Bill doesn’t know who Bennett is, being strictly a West coast player, but name recognition has never been a requirement to name-dropping for Truman. If you didn’t know who he’s talking about, he gives the impression you should probably not let on.

“Do you know her?” Bill, my protector, asks. The service has yet to begin.

Truman shakes his head to indicate no. “She’s lovely, and I am an admirer of lovely women,” Truman replies, sounding both older and younger than his years. His breathy voice, not yet fully formed. When Tru was in his prime, his voice sounded like a petulant child of five, too precious, with a lisp borne of a tongue too large for one’s lips. Tru always denied a lisp, and when we were friends, I humored him.

“An odd place to meet women,” Bill replies, looking around at the somber pews, dusty rose wallpaper and subdued conversations taking place around them.

“Not for the handsome husband, it seems,” Tru indicates the toothsome starlet in the back pew to their left. She’d obviously picked up something ‘funeral’ from wardrobe, but even the baggy fit couldn’t hide her curvaceous appeal.

“Wesley’s a prick, always has been, but she wanted him,” says Bill, he scooped a cigarette from Truman’s proffered pack.

“She doesn’t need to stay. She could have anybody,” Truman laughs, “You, for example, would leave your wife so fast, she’d get windburn.”

“I love my wife,” Bill replies, visibly stung. Then gruffly, “I think you’d better leave. Voyeurs wait outside.”

“I am here as Mr. Selznick’s guest.” Selznick’s guest. How the hell did Tru know Selznick back then? I can’t believe he never mentioned that he was at my mother’s funeral. Perhaps he really did stalk me, maybe he had planned his betrayal much longer than I knew. But was that realistic? Would he hold onto a kernel of a story idea for so long?

Bill rolls his eyes. “Only in Hollywood would funerals be a ticket for social climbers.”

Truman shakes his head earnestly. “Not so. In the South too, funerals are big news – who shows up, who doesn’t, what inappropriate frock they wore. Death is big business for gossip mongers and funeral directors alike. Seems like God is hardly involved anymore.”

“You’re religious?”

He shook his head from side to side. “No, just Southern. How long have you been in love with her?”

Bill ignored the question. “I doubt somehow that a passion for beautiful women led you here. I suspect bathhouses are a likelier destination for your passions.”

“Touché.” Then referring back to his earlier question. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, you know. Unrequited love is one of life’s greatest motivators.” Truman’s assurance, considering his youth, is remarkable. And poor Bill was either too much of a gentleman or not drunk enough to pop him one. Unrequited love, Bill loved me, but not romantically. At least not enough to act on it. I think he was wise enough, to even then suspect I would have chewed him up and spit him out. That would have been

the end to his orderly life and my one unbetrayed relationship. And Truman, what a liar, his greatest motivation was fame or infamy, he didn't care which.

"Please be seated." The minister's voice echoes from the podium. The sermon is short and tedious. The minister knows nothing of my mother other than what Wesley could scrape from his own memory. Soon he booms forth, with unfelt clichés, which makes the whole exercise more pitiable to me. Hardly anyone in the room knows her. A few elderly gentlemen sit in the middle pews. I could only assume they were friends or lovers. At least that's what I hope.

Truman stays until the very end. The guests rustle out and he even pays his respects to Wesley and me. How could I have not noticed him? He was gorgeous, just like his infamous picture on the back of Other Voices, Other Rooms which would scandalize and titillate three years later. An uneven, blond fringe combed casually over his high, wide forehead, a tender, top lip slightly bowed and thick, tarnished brows dart over his wide-set gaze. Very pretty. His slight frame, narrow and elegant in his dark suit looks conspicuously tidy next to Selznick, who speaks intently to him after he leaves the chapel. Why a producer of Selznick's stature would have flown in this untried writer barely graduated from Manhattan's Franklin School is a mystery. Outside, it is lovely, one of those sun-fresh days that mock sadness. In the noontime sun, Tru's fair head looks up at Selznick.

"Did you speak with her?" Selznick asks.

"No, I paid my respects, she nodded. I doubt she even realized she didn't know me."

Wait I wanted to interrupt. Why are you here? Why are you talking to my friends?

"I can introduce you, if you wish."

"I'd rather not. I'd prefer to watch for a while." So he was stalking me. But why me?

"How's the script coming?" Selznick questions.

"It's finished." Truman replies. "I dropped it off this morning."

"Great, and the Sunny stuff - any ideas?" What were they up to?

"Tell me what you know about her. I spoke to Bill Powell a bit."

"Well, then you know Bill discovered her," Selznick says.

"What interests me is why both you and Bill refer to his meeting as *discovering*.

She's not a starlet." No I was better, you fool, I was fabulous.

"Yes, but she's an original, worth recording." Selznick insists.

"I don't know. Perhaps. I'll see. Is that her kid?" Truman nodded to Cecily, who was being carefully carted out by Kiko in a basket.

"Yeah," Selznick replied dismissively.

"I guess she's too distraught to pay it much attention right now." Truman offered.

Selznick sighed. "Sun's not the most maternal creature. Interesting though, you'll see. You're the writer, make it up."

Truman nods. "I had a mother like that." He said quietly, then louder, "I'll see. If she's a bore, I won't invent something." They walk to Selznick's limousine. Was that the appeal I wonder - the mother connection? He had no problem inventing, but he needed to work within fact to find his fiction. I guess he was just casting about for story ideas,

perhaps seeing if I was an 'it' girl to exploit. Maybe tossing around ideas for Holly Golightly, I don't know. But I do know now that I was on his radar screen well before he was on mine.

Chapter Fourteen

Now Mutti's gone. They are all gone. Please let me have the pictures back. I don't even need the sounds, though that organ playing was lovely. It's high noon again here – white, white light, nothing to look at, nobody to talk to, nothing to think about but me.

Wesley and Cecily were all the family I had after Mama died. It did not, however, alter our problems. I had been flirting with the idea of divorce before mother's death. With the advent of Wesley's latest girlfriend, a waif-like bimbo, who left scratch marks on his back, my resolve strengthened. Not long after a trip together to New York, I grew bored. Wesley started on another film and another leading lady. I started on nothing. I would wake up in the morning, eat my breakfast in bed, listen to Cecily whimper in the nursery and to Nanny Kim attempt to console her. Occasionally, I would feel sufficiently responsible to wander into the nursery and see what was going on. It was a lovely room, turning out just as our mothers and I had envisioned so long ago on that sunny Mother's Day. A lovely blue on the walls, the remembered shade of my dear Henry's eyes, soft-hued bears and trains painted randomly on the blue. Amid the hand-embroidered linens lay a red-faced, squalling brat.

I did not try too hard to love her, I must admit. Perhaps if Mutti had lived, we could have found it in our hearts together to embrace her, but this puny, mewling beast seemed to have no relation to me. I missed Mutti every day, and this child was cold comfort for what I had lost. In my mind, the two events became inextricably linked,

Cecily's birth and Mutti's death. After checking in on Cecily or not checking in on her, I would wander to the stables and ride for a few hours, sometimes longer. I kept an impeccable stable. Of course I had stable hands to do the heavy work, but I got a charge out of grooming my horse Ginny myself. I had learned in preparation of the birth of my son. Perhaps all my maternal urges were spent there. Ginny certainly gave me more peace than Cecily ever did.

Still, I knew I couldn't go on being the lovely, stay-at-home Mrs. Hayden, who rides horses, needle points and ignores her child all day long. I called Marion when I felt at my most lonesome. We hadn't really talked in ages, but a distant friend is better than none at all.

"What do I do? All I do all day is wander aimlessly, pointlessly."

"Oh honey, every body goes through that when they have a baby." I thought this was interesting from a childless woman. "You've just got the blues, you need an affair, that's all."

"Huh?" I stupidly replied.

"Yes sweetie, you just need to distract yourself like Wesley is. It'll give you a little excitement, perk you right up, you'll see. And now is really the perfect time."

"There are perfect times for affairs?"

“Oh don’t be so ingenuous. Of course there are perfect times for affairs. Summer and Fall are the seasons for affairs. Never take a lover in the winter. You’ll mess us and may get caught what with Christmas scheduling, parties and shopping – really it’s too busy a time. A lover would just feel like another obligation. Spring isn’t good because you have to make your summer plans then and you’re doing the garden. But Summer and Fall are just delightful. In Summer wives are often away someplace warm and sexy and have time to really relax and enjoy themselves. And Fall is so full of possibility that everyone feels potent and it’s starting to chill so people feel like cuddling.”

“I should write this down.” Marion had obviously gone off her rocker, but at least she’d landed in a funny place. “Wait a minute, you said this was the perfect time to have an affair.”

“Yes, it is.”

“But it’s Spring.”

“Ah yes, well one thing trumps spring.”

“What’s that?”

“Returning war heros. Right as we speak a bunch of healthy, red-blooded distractions were on their way home. They need to be comforted, Sunny. They need to be made whole. Hell, maybe I’ll go down to the shipyard and find a young ensign. You have me feeling very patriotic.”

“Glad I could help.” I said wryly and hung up the phone.

Before the war I’d only known Clark Gable slightly. We’d met at San Simeon and again through Wesley. His famous marriage to the stunning comedic actress Carole Lombard ended tragically in 1942, when Carole was killed in a plane crash while hawking war bonds. They lived a brief, storied marriage. Three short years and a library of press clips later, the grief-stricken man who’d been crowned king of Hollywood, joined the Air Force. Photographs of him abounded, natty in his uniform, vacant-eyed (one assumed) with heartsickness.

Major Clark Gable, recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal for his bombing missions over Germany, returned from the war to land on the front lawn of Sunny Hollow one bright afternoon. He stood, still in uniform – he was not yet detached from the Air Force – tilted against his motorcycle, my crumpled periwinkle beneath his tires. It’s not every day a girl wanders out her front door to see Rhett Butler ravaging her garden.

“I wouldn’t expect someone sporting that horrendous haircut to care about despoiling my pretty garden, but I would expect a military man to observe rules of private property.” I sauntered over.

He looked me over from tip to toe, grinned wide and wicked, and captured me in a bear hug I’ve never experienced the like of since. “Sunny,” he said.

“Welcome back, soldier,” was all I could say. I held him tight. If he cared to remember our acquaintance more vividly than I, who was I to argue? He was glad to be home I gathered. Home, where ornamental, frivolous women were free to worry about their pretty ground covering.

After a bit, the hug grew less emotional and more intimate so I pushed him away. “Well, now that you’ve saved the world, killed my periwinkle and managed to lose none of your charm, I suppose you are here to see Wesley.”

He nodded. “I understand the boys have a motorcycle club. I want in on it.” Wesley, John Huston, Gary Cooper and a few of the boys had a motorcycle thing going every Sunday afternoon. From that point on Clark would show up weekly, spectacular in denim and a white shirt, to ride with the boys. A little flirtation began. Clark had a well-known weakness for salty-tongued blondes before he married Carole. His appetite for them hadn’t abated with their marriage. I mined this shamelessly whenever he careened up the driveway.

I laid out a lovely tea when they returned. It had been revealed to me that the secret to appearing elegant in the upper echelons of American society was to ape the British. John Barrymore shared this tidbit before he passed out in our azaleas one evening. Now, every chance I got, especially when the Manhattan magazine people arrived – they always welcomed pretension – I would lay out silver hot-dishes containing scones and girdle cakes and a pot of Tiptree jam. Mitfordian, indeed!

At first Cecily joined us for tea. A sour addition she was - even as a toddler. She would sit with Nanny, neither smiling nor cooing – a totally pointless child. Guests would quickly give up trying to render a change in her dumb expression and move away, slightly embarrassed. Soon, I told Nanny not to bother. I saw no point in making our guests uncomfortable. People tend to internalize an unsuccessful interaction with a child as a comment on their character, especially actors. It was too wearing to be surrounded by celebrated faces racked with self-doubt because my bluish-white blob of a child missed her social cue.

Clark began asking me to his home with great regularity. It was innocent enough, at first. We didn't have sex right away. We'd ride at his home in Encino, then lunch, and then ride some more. As we grew closer our routine changed little, though oftentimes it didn't involve horses. For both of us this relationship was a placeholder. For what, we'd not yet decided. I know I reminded Clark of Carole. I played that up. And for me, well, he was Clark Gable. The most desirable man in the universe was a special kind of balm for my battered ego and I applied it often. We played for a while together. Quite indiscreetly, I see in retrospect. We'd never get away with it now. The paparazzi would blitz us. But then a certain kind of code was in place even among the tackiest tabloids. I was a married woman, and therefore, out of respect for the sanctity of marriage, I was protected from their negative attention. They let us off the hook for quite a while.

Eventually, too cocky, we tipped our hand. While we'd been going around in California, keeping to Clark's ranch or Sunny Hollow there was little that could be said, but an opportunity came to go to New York together and we went.

Clark had to go to Europe for a film and he had asked me to go with him. Of course I told him no, citing my maternal duties to Cecily and the need for discretion. He insisted that at least I see him off in New York. It sounded like a grand idea.

Clark's plan, I think, was to get me in New York and then send word to Wesley that our marriage was over. He'd complained on many occasions about 'sneaking around.' This was dramatically overstating our efforts. Wesley was hardly ever home - very little sneaking was involved.

We took separate flights to New York and met up at the Ritz, registering for our rooms under assumed names. These precautions were all for naught because we headed to the Colony to sup. Gable being Gable, we were stuck with the premier table in the joint. I tried to protest, but Clark overrode my objections, trying to force my hand no doubt. Soon it was springtime in New York with bulbs popping everywhere, and my romance was once again fodder for the New York tabloids. Other than the press coverage our night was lively, but uneventful. However, we woke in the morning to discover a small coterie of MGM press people waiting for Clark in the room adjoining his. I asked whether they'd had time to install the peephole. They responded that they had my daughter and Nanny in tow. I told them their tactics were positively Bolshevik. They told me they'd pass it on to their boss, Louis B. Mayer.

To shield his box-office golden boy from the scandal of an adulterous affair, Mr. Mayer, the original ‘family values’ hypocrite, decided no woman could be untrue to her husband with her child present. Such was Mayer’s power that by the next day all of our pictures were plastered on the front page with headings like: *Hollywood Hero Chaperones Best Friend’s family around Town*. According to this revised version, Gable, at the behest of powerful Hollywood director Wesley Hayden escorted the family around the big apple for a fun-filled few days before leaving to complete a movie in Europe. Little Cecily is apparently despondent at the thought of losing Uncle Clark to the Europeans for even a short time.

The studio threatened suspension – morals clauses were standard practice in actor’s contracts then – if Clark didn’t squire the family around New York for a few photo ops. I like to think he didn’t resist because he was worried about my reputation. He certainly had enough money to endure an extended suspension. But the public was a fickle force and negative press killed many a healthy career.

Wesley, of course, thought this was all a great joke. I had to laugh when I received his telegram:

Darling. Stop. Redoing the nursery. Stop. Regards to Uncle Clark. Stop.

Christian, who rang several times once he realized I was in town, wanted in on the merriment.

“Let me take you out, leave your daughter with uncle Clark and the nanny and we can go out for a great dinner. You owe me anyway.”

“I owe you?” I laughed at his audacity. He was such fun to talk to. I instantly felt lighter when he was around in a way that neither Clark nor Wesley had ever made me feel.

“Absolutely, I have been trying to make you fall in love with me since you hooked that damn fish and instead you are distracted by everyone but me. Very selfish of you really.” I giggled. I mean really giggled. Looking on me now I can see I giggled like a seventeen year-old prom queen runner up. I started falling in love with him right there.

Smiling wide into the phone I agreed, “No doubt about it sir, I am a very, very selfish girl. What kind of half-witted woman allows herself to be distracted by Ernest Hemingway, William Powell and Clark Gable? You must forget me immediately and find yourself a girl who can focus.”

“Sure rub it in. Okay, so you’re out of my league, I get it. I just don’t care. Come out to dinner with me tonight. I’ll get a small group together. You bring big ears along.” Clark did have prominent tea-cup ears, but nobody’s perfect.

“We’ll go see *Myru the Telepathic* at the Pierre,” Christian declared.

I nodded into the phone and said okay. He said he would send a car for us at 7:00.

We met Christian and his friends Bill and Babe Paley at the Pierre. They were already seated at the table. Even Clark who'd seen more beautiful women in his time than a Hollywood makeup artist was blown away by the lovely Babe. Forever topping the best dressed list, she was also stunningly gorgeous and well-mannered. Bill Paley, of course, was the founder of CBS and had more money than God. Both were a fun and lively couple happy to rub shoulders with a little Hollywood glitz. This was Clark's last night before leaving on the Queen Mary and the last thing he wanted to do was share me with another man, especially one as sparkly as Christian. But, as all of New York was watching thanks to the tabloids, there was no help for it.

Myru was a blast. Christian arranged for everything. Our round table was three rows back and off to the left so as not to attract too much attention – fat chance. We were the epicenter of lowered eyes until the lights dimmed and Myru entered stage right. A corpulent vision in purple velvet, Myru looked like a dented Christmas tree ornament. I looked around. The sophisticated crowd in evening attire didn't seem to mind his schmaltzy get up. In fact, the boredom they'd feigned when Clark and I entered the room was conspicuously absent from their faces. Happier in the anonymity of darkness we plowed through several bottles of Krug while a blindfolded Myru guessed names, ages and marital status. Inevitably his assistant made it over to our table. She asked for my wedding ring. Then, unlike the other readings, without any prompting from her, he began.

Dramatically, he clasped my ring in his fist and pressed his fist to his forehead. "Ah yes, I can tell this belongs to a very desirable woman. A famous beauty." I looked

over at Christian and rolled my eyes. “She has a complicated social life, it seems.

Confusing, yes.”

Some in the audience snickered. Gable rustled in his seat and glared at Christian. “She is in love, yes, in love, with a man she has known a while, a famous man. He is *extremely* handsome and charming. Very, very, very bright.” *Well, two out of three ain’t bad*, I thought to myself, *this Myru is no seer*.

“But she is committed to another, a man of humbler origins, lesser intellect.” Now, that was way off, there were a lot of things to love about Clark, but his intellect never topped the list. His would certainly never be considered superior to Wesley’s.

Christian’s eyes sparkled brightly. He was enjoying this thoroughly. I hoped, in vain, that there were no press people present. Bill and Babe were grinning openly.

“It makes no difference,” Myru continued. “Love will win. She will be unable to resist her passion any longer and will give herself over fully to her one true love. . .” a drum roll as the audience waited breathlessly, “. . . Christian Marcus!”

And with that Christian could contain himself no longer. He barked with laughter, picked me up in his arms and said in a stage voice, “Darling is it true? Am I the one for you? Will you leave old Dumbo behind?”

The rest of the audience, now in on the joke, shouted with laughter. Clark was furious. As far as I was concerned he’d brought it on himself. Fortunately, before he

could retaliate against Christian, a photographer for the Journal-American jumped up and snapped a shot of Clark glowering at Christian, in whose arms I was cradled. A picture was worth a thousand words for Cholly Knickerbocker's column the next day.

Instead of a monologue from Hell, I should have simply assembled Cholly's pictures of me into a photoplay in life. I swear those boys followed my everywhere.

Chapter Fifteen

Christian and I started dating that night. Clark excused himself shortly after Myru's reading. He wanted me to go with him but I suggested he get a good night sleep to prepare for his boat ride the next day. He left pouting but I didn't care. I was having a lovely time and as a married woman it would be inappropriate for me to leave with him or so I said to him. I thought his head would explode at my hypocrisy. He was appealing 'in character,' but a girl can only burn Atlanta so many times before even bedtime becomes routine. Christian on the other hand didn't seem routine at all; he knew everyone, loved a party and had an original thing to say on any topic. Best of all he seemed interested in what I had to say. Not in what he thought I should say, or what a girl like me would say, but in what I had to say. It was so flattering and freeing he quickly became my best friend. Later when I met Truman Capote I thought how like Christian he was.

Wesley was very easy about the divorce and so was I. In fact we talked more than we had in years. Neither one of us was angry. We were just done with each other. He hadn't found true love but I had and he was happy for me. I think really looking back on it, my marriage to him was more business relationship than marriage. He didn't sweep me off my feet and I don't think I swept him either. I was young and beautiful. He was handsome and rich and somehow we figured that was enough. I was the Hayden woman, just not his Hayden woman. He was marriage and respectability and wealth. I got tired of

dancing for my dinner and he got tired of eating alone. Trite I know, but we were trite people.

“Good Lord, he’s so eager to get rid of you he’s doing the hand-off himself,” Christian teased. Christian never held it against Wesley that he’d been my first husband, and Wesley never held it against Christian when he became my second. They both teased me mercilessly that Rhett Butler was in-between. They were, I suspect, secretly flattered that I found Hollywood’s heartthrob duller than either of them. We three got along so well, I asked Wesley to give me away at my wedding to Christian.

“As long as you’re there to grab the baton I don’t mind a bit,” I laughed, and I truly didn’t care who was there. I was blissful. Hitler himself could have attended the nuptials and I wouldn’t have blinked.

We wed, quietly, without fanfare or fascists, on my 31st birthday, June 15, 1948 at Kiluna, Bill and Babe Paley’s estate in Manhasset, New York. It was a happy day, my happiest, in fact. There at Kiluna, surrounded by a small group of friends, I felt loved. Everything made sense. Wesley standing with me seemed to ease our sad times and give meaning to our lost marriage. It wasn’t a complete failure if we could still like each other this much. I felt beautiful. And I was. I actually outshone the lovely Babe. Surely the only time that ever happened. Pure joy lifts our eyes, improves skin tone and reduces fine lines

– if only Max Factor could bottle it. A vibrator may produce a similar effect – though the eyes would be glassy, rather than shiny, a subtle but memorable difference.

I can almost feel it. Watching me experience it, I almost get to feel it. Almost but not quite – that Satan, such a tease. Wait, we’re drifting again, focus with me, I don’t want to lose this. This is my favorite bit. Please. Let me just see it this once.

Babe arranged everything with Christian. When they had a question, they queried my faithful Bill Powell who was thrilled with my new relationship. Unlike most brides, who declare the day a blur, I remember every detail. I always did. My outfit, a fine example of Dior’s revolutionary New Look in pale yellow silk couldn’t have been more different from my first frail wedding gown, or more appropriate. A huge skirt was projected from the cinched waist. The style altered the way I walked for over half a decade. From 1947, well into the 50’s, I swished from side to side. No design since has ever felt so feminine. Babe dotted her lawn with three white tents. Over each tent leg hung a bolt of buttercup silk. The pinnacle of each tent was marked with a golden sun. Bill had suggested some errant troubadours, but Christian nixed it. The only gallant man to have center stage would be him. Sunflowers topped each linen table cloth, and cascaded from the arch we wed below. Our vows were our own, written in private the night before. We didn’t share them till our moment of union.

Christian, in a crisp navy suit, looked professionally styled to coordinate with all the yellow around him. He stood proudly beside me, beneath the arch. He held my hand for a long time before speaking.

“I am made to be your cohort, your consort, your passion.” He spoke slowly, and then, paused for a moment. “You are made to be my compass, my conspirator, my comfort. Together we’ll play and laugh, for you are beautiful, I am rich, and the world is ours.”

Our wedding party shattered into laughter. He could not go unanswered, so I scrapped my prepared words and ad-libbed. The laughter relaxed me. Yet, when I began to speak, I found my hands shaking visibly. Christian quietly slipped his around them and held on.

“I have struck the better deal, for beauty is fleeting, but thanks to the magic of compound interest, riches can last for ever.” More laughter. Then I moved my hands around his, and raised them to my lips and kissed them gently, and everyone quieted.

“You make everything easy and warm in my world. I wake with anticipation and joy, like a child on her birthday, every day, glad to open the present that is you again and again. May each day be more fun than the next and each night warmer still. I love you Christian, and I always will.” I leaned in to kiss him, softly, then deeply. Our friends cheered.

Christian had made it clear he wouldn’t move from New York, and I was happy to oblige and leave the West Coast for good. I wanted to trade in Hollywood pretensions for a classier, Eastern Seaboard kind, and make a fresh start. Christian, being a Broadway producer and agent extraordinaire, knew everyone, and loved socializing. I gleefully

packed away my needlepoint, enrolled Cecily in preschool, and began entertaining in earnest.

New York in 1948 was the most exciting city in the world. Europe and the U.K. were recovering slowly from their flirtation with Fascism. The British Colonies were faltering in their Britishness. After years of cultural domination by Caucasian bluebloods, America was dismantling the last vestiges of her colonial ties. New York led the way. Broadway had just seen the openings of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Brigadoon* and *Finian's Rainbow*. Writers were the cultural focal point of the media. Now that the war was over, each critic wanted to be the first to identify this generation's Hemingway.

Life magazine selected its own group of up-and-coming writers; all but one had at least a novel behind them. It was Truman, the novel-less one, whose picture was chosen to lead the story. Truman, whose genius for publicity stumped the publishing world. Never before had a novelist been so famous for a novel not yet published.

The city's society rules were snapping and groups were mixing. Parts of New York could still be had cheaply. Oftentimes the very rich and exceedingly poor were separated by little more than a slim building. Tenements cornered luxury blocks. A few hundred yards separated Beekman Place, one of the grandest East Side addresses, from the riverside tanneries and slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay, where on any given morning animals could be seen driven from truck to charnel. The skyline was still unfettered by modern glass rectangles; instead it remained a loopy mixture of architectural whims. A city reverberating with 1.8 million people clustered on 14,000 acres.

To understand the potential for change, you have to understand New York socially then, you have to grasp the legendary four hundred and what the war did to it. New York society's four hundred – which Truman later aped during his Black and White Ball, by limiting the guest list to five hundred and forty, the capacity of the Plaza Ballroom – were all the bodies that could be entertained sixty years before, in the drawing room of Mrs. Caroline Schermerhorn Astor. Mrs. Astor's husband was the great-grandson of a German butcher, but she herself claimed descent from Scottish Kings. This four hundred became the traditional quota of utterly, socially acceptable New Yorkers, as listed in the *Social Register*.

To get in the Register was quite an ordeal. When Babe Paley lost her foothold, it was a crushing blow to her mother, who'd managed to install all three daughters there, within a decade. You propose yourself, presenting your pedigree and give references of six people already in the book, or you "marry into the Register" as the saying goes. However, as we saw with Babe, the sexism at the time only allowed women to marry into the Register. By 1948, there were many more names than four hundred in the book, but still it was regarded as the supreme nod of social worth.

Everywhere, the war discredited social distinctions, and Manhattan was no exception. But snobbism's death grip on New York surprised even the most dedicated Brahmins. Among the Old Families, as they called themselves, few of the pre-war conventions had been abandoned, from the annual summer migration to Newport or Nantucket, to the series of winter balls, often held in the ballroom of the Plaza, where their daughters were presented to society. A debutante's future in 1948 depended on the

Grosvenor Ball, the Gotham Ball, and the Junior League Ball. The truly successful debbs were celebrities, household names.

At the end of World War II there was no European social protocol to match all this, not even in England. Foreign aristocrats, like the Duke of Windsor, or the innumerable Italian counts who frequented the Manhattan milieus, were amazed by the formality. Still the foundation was shifting. Red carpets rolled out now at Penn Station every time the *Twentieth Century Limited* arrived from the West Coast with its cache of Hollywood stars. Heroes returned from Europe still garbed in khaki and were welcomed in private salons that just six years ago would have been barred them.

Christian loved his work as a producer – the electric thrill of opening night, the pretty, gay people clustered around him all the time. I once wondered aloud why he hadn't gone straight for center stage.

"You know how badly actors can get treated," he responded, "I would much prefer to boss, than be bossed. Plus I'm better at it. I enjoy it, not for the power, but the pleasure." He was, of course, right. He lived for pleasure. Each of us, at our center, has a basic instinct to either sullenness or sensuality. Like Tru, he was a sensualist, a bon vivant. He could boss, and do it well, because he so enjoyed the process and the people.

After we were married for a couple of years, Christian induced me to work, not for the money, but for the sheer fun of it. He thought it would amuse me. I explained I was quite useless at all things people would pay for, except the one thing our vows forbade. Still, he persisted. One day in the fall of 1951, he was all excited because a wardrobe woman had quit. His play, called *Sweet Dreams*, was fairly easy to style since it

was an all-female cast, made up of stock characters. Not one of his more inspired productions, but still a success at the time. He implored me to take the job.

“Sunny, for me. Think of how wonderful it would be to work together, too.”

I was mildly astonished at his comment. It seemed to me, we spent a great deal of time together as it was. We met for lunch nearly every day and had been for the past three years – even when he had a business meeting with a client. We were forever taking off to Paris for weeks at a time, migrating to Le Grand Vefour to indulge in four hour luncheons amid the porcelain walls and faded velvet. Work together too? When would I get anything done? I liked a certain amount of mirror and telephone time. Still, he was so sweet, of course I said, yes.

“Now you mustn’t be embarrassed by me darling, if I do or say the wrong thing. You know I am quite unused to the pressures of the daily grind.” I was only being slightly ironic. I hopped out of bed the next morning at ten of eleven, ready to embrace my role as career woman. Marta, my new lady’s maid, brought orange juice and a croissant to my bedside as usual, but I ignored it in the flurry to find the look of ‘married career woman of style’ in my closet.

I hurried to the theatre to get my instructions, and then dashed off to organize the clothes. I met with the actresses again and again, taking measurements and talking about each character. Finally, I assembled what I felt were the best selections for each. I even hand sewed a label for each of them on every item of clothing and accessory so there would be no confusion. It was masterful, everyone knew exactly what to wear, when to where it and how.

My moment of truth came at the first full, dress rehearsal. I was sitting with a pal I'd made among the company. He was a stagehand or something, sweet-looking boy. The lights went down, the curtain went up, and the first act began. It was wonderful. I experienced such pride of ownership and accomplishment. The play itself was startlingly bad, truly a ghastly waste of curtain time; however, the women looked perfect. In the fourth scene, the actress who played the beauty pounced on stage. First I heard a growl and then: "What the fuck?" A gruff man shouted at her from third row center. "Can someone please tell me what the fuck you have over your goddam face?"

I was shocked and offended for the poor thing. I stood and shouted on her behalf. "For your information, that is a copy of an exquisite *petit chapeau* designed by the divine Cristobal Balenciaga himself. That silk veiling is woven by hand. It is *trés soigné*, you barbarian." I stood ten rows behind him. He swung around and had to squint to see me.

My stagehand pal ducked behind the seats, so as not to be seen with me.

The barbarian shook visibly at my response "What the fuck?" he said more loudly. "Fucking Cristofuck – soggy! I don't know who you think you are, lady, but I'm goddammed if I'm going to pay extra money for a good-looking broad, only to cover her whole goddam face. This is the theatre, lady. If I wanted to veil 'em, I could have got a whole lotta cheap, dog-faced broads and done radio instead."

My cowardly stagehand friend, whose voice was muffled by the faded velvet seat he had his face pressed against whispered, "That's the executive producer."

I gasped. I could see his point. This was, after all, theatre. I hadn't thought about the importance of facial appearance, or expression. I felt whole-heartedly embarrassed. I

ran out of the theatre and collided with Bill Paley, who had just lunched with Christian. He was flagging a cab uptown.

“Want a lift, pretty lady?” he laughed at me. I nodded, stricken.

He slid in beside me and told the cabbie to take us to the park. I looked up at him confused, and then shook my head, playing over the recent events in my mind.

“Spill it Sunny, whatever it is, it ain’t that bad.” He slung his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. He smelled wonderful, sandlewood and tobacco. Bill, like Christian, was a fastidious man, always well-dressed and well-groomed. He was extremely attractive too. His crisp white shirt enhanced his smooth olive-toned skin. He’d always been demonstrative with me. I paid no attention to it, and in fact, tried hard to avoid being close enough to let him touch me in front of Babe. I could tell it bothered her.

Conversely, nothing would bother my supremely confident Christian, who knew I adored him beyond reason. Still, I enjoyed a sympathetic ear. I told him of my experience, including the “Cristo-fuck soggy” which I couldn’t help giggling at now.

“Basically, I am a failure. I can’t believe I let Christian talk me into it. I am not made to work. I just don’t have it in me. Can you imagine if I had to make a living? I’d starve!” I shrugged like a performance artist.

“Sweetheart, there is no way on God’s green earth that any red-blooded man would let you go without tea, much less a meal.” He held me close again. “Speaking of which, I’m starving, let me buy you a consolation lunch.”

“You just ate, with Christian, remember?”

“I guess I’m hungry again.” He held my hands in my lap, and my stomach lurched slightly. Forget about working your way into a girl’s heart, all the really sexy men in my life have seduced me at lunch where the promise of lunch and midday sex made my stomach somersault.

We stopped at the Plaza, and Bill ran in for a picnic basket of goodies. Then, with basket in hand, we walked across to the park and climbed aboard a buggy.

“Deep into the park, please,” he commanded, “we’re in no hurry, and there’s a five dollar tip for every time we get lost.”

I laughed, delighted and starving.

Oh for God’s, sake don’t be shocked. I fully warned you. I felt bad about myself, and Bill helped me feel good again. That’s it, that’s all – no grandiose rationalizations from me. I still adored Christian; in fact sex with another can help you appreciate your beloved more. The familiarity of touch can be as erotic, as the unfamiliarity can be exotic. They were very different in bed; Bill took himself very seriously, in a romance novel kind of way. Christian played more. Both have their merits, but I was in love with only one.

Chapter Sixteen

Truman and I met at an after 5, held by Diana Vreeland in the early 1950 after Christian and I had been married about six years.

We have to try to go there, to make it emerge. Diana's apartment was extraordinary, the colors so vivid. I think I could exist for a long while on seeing that place again. It was a two bedroom apartment at 550 Park Avenue - perfectly delicious, tiny, the chicest thing you ever saw, ten-cent chintz and everything. Diana designed the place with Billy, of course, to look like a 'Garden in Hell.' She damn near accomplished it, as far as I was concerned – that was before of course I became familiar with Hell and it's startling lack of imagination.

Imagine lacquer reds, with crimson-colored, floral wall coverings, horn and silver snuff boxes, an assortment of shells from her travels, and books, books, books. Isn't it fabulous. Oh thank you, whoever you are for letting me see this. There, hunkered down in the center of her living room is this brilliant Indian print sofa with a skyscraper of cushions. Diana would hold court there before, and after dinner, with everyone arranged on small cushions around her feet. Shiny scarlet reflected in curtain-framed mirrors on every wall. Bettina Ballard called it "an overcrowded Turkish seraglio on a rather elegant boat." Every time I entered, I felt I'd been dipped in a bottle of Revlon nail varnish. Pre-cocktails, it was rather unsettling. Post-life it's like every experience of life distilled into one room.

Her genius or Billy's - though I strongly suspect it was Diana's - was the vases of wayward white tulips placed strategically around the close space. One's eyes just drank in the clean, unpretentious simplicity of the tulips, like they were beakers of spring water.

Diana was, of course, a terrifically stylish girl. She rather famously stood by Truman when the rest of society dropped him because of his tattle-tales. Strange really, when she saw him in public, she would stalk over to him, like some chivalrous white knight in drag, then kiss and hug him. Very publicly in the thick of it, yet in private she cut him dead. He called her once, shortly after *La Côte Basque*, 1965 was published, and demanded to know what she thought. Typical of La Vreeland her response was eminently quotable "Oh Truman, you do write so fetchingly about the little, tiny vegetables served by the rich." Her quote was later included in a Liz Smith article, embellished with a fabulous Edward Sorel drawing of Truman as a bulldog, biting the bejeweled hand that fed him in the February 9, 1976 edition of *New York* magazine. Perhaps we made too big of a deal of it.

Pre-scandal, Truman would have lacerated Diana for her ridiculous behavior, especially for thinking it *noble*. Post-scandal, he was happy at least to have the 'public' support. I guess felt bad for him at that point. I don't know why, I certainly don't feel bad for him now. He should have just handled it better. It was terrific publicity.

He had Diana introduce us. That was the norm – he would never risk the rejection of just schlepping up to me, he made Diana 'sponsor' him.

Diana had once been famously described as resembling a cigar store Indian. Seeing her before me then, her navy blue hair shiny against matte, black cashmere, her

slender legs encased in vivid, pink, silk slacks, I couldn't get the image out of my head. Incomprehensibly I was overtaken with the desire to greet her with a childish "How."

I saw Diana eyeing me with intent. I was in no mood to be gracious and 'Babe-ish,' in fact, I was a little pissed that Babe Paley, my bosom-buddy and better-half escaped to Kiluna, her estate on Long Island this weekend without me. I wondered whether some fork-tongued gossips – excuse the Indian theme, I can't seem to lose it – were whispering about Bill and me again.

. We were nothing, if not discreet. Really, it had nothing to do with Babe, we both adored Babe, everyone adored Babe. Anyway, Bill humped half the Register, I suspect to get even with the other half for keeping their 'no-Jews allowed' clubs closed to him. I figured I'd cool it with him for a while, a thought that didn't please me. He was quite delightful.

Diana was dragging an elf-like, pretty boy behind her. He possessed an enormously large head. His white, blondness simply accentuated her 'native' look.

"How," I greeted, saluting 'injun-like'. I unfolded from the Beirdermier chaise longue unsteadily; just enough in my cups to welcome Truman's steadying hand.

"Sunny, darling, you simply have to meet my dearest, friend Truman. Truman, Sunny is the funniest woman in the room, present company excepted of course, bold as brass and delightfully dishy. Frankly, I can't believe you two haven't already met, you know everybody in common I'm sure. Sunny's husband---"

“---Is Christian Marcus, of course. *South Pacific* and *Mister Roberts* were fabulous.” He finished, referring to my husband’s recent successes on Broadway. He always did his homework.

“*The Grass Harp* is brilliant,” I replied in kind, referring to his critically acclaimed, best-selling first novel.

“Ah, a book lover.”

“A review lover actually, why bother with the whole thing, if you can get to the balls of it in 25 words or less.” I arched against Diana’s Persian flower fabric and beamed factiously.

“Women like you don’t even have to go to even that much effort,” he said, gesturing skyward with his glass.

“Not when we keep writers as pets.” I replied tartly. I’ve never liked being lumped with other women.

Diana looked at us both, a wry glint in her eye. “Must dash darlings – do drink.” She placed a scotch in my hand. “That’s today’s ‘Why Don’t You?’ Drink. Simply brilliant, I know. No wonder those boys on Madison love me!” Kissing the air she left us to make nice.

“You’re tall for a woman, Big Mama,” Truman began, pushing his thick framed glasses back on his nose

“And you’re tiny for anyone.”

He winced. “Small in stature perhaps---”

I rolled my eyes before he could finish. “Aren’t you going to dazzle me with your bitchy one-liners, until you glean enough information to mimic me at tomorrow night’s dinner?” I’d heard about his near-vaudevillian ability to sing for his supper by aping his acquaintances.

Truman squeaked with laughter. Naturally, everyone looked over – that was the intention – see how much fun we are having, we two. Don’t you wish you could hear what we’re saying? Truman put his hand on my arm intimately and we sank back down on the chaise longue.

“Big Mama, you got it. That’s my game. But, you’re too smart, too tall and too photographed to care. What could my little tales tell the world that you haven’t already?”

He was right, of course, at thirty-seven I told my own tales, I didn’t need the press or wannabes to do it for me.

His voice turned serious. “That’s the rub, really. One liners about pretty women in pretty clothes grow tired quickly, might as well just photograph them - and that’s Diana’s job.” He was referring to Diana’s position as fashion editor of Bazaar. “I’d like to reveal women. My mother is a beautiful woman who wears attractive clothes extremely well – like you. However, she’s quite insane and she doesn’t have your *American-ness*. Really darling, you do seem as if you could have just lassoed a Bison – do people lasso Bison? Just moments *before* slipping into Balenciaga. You’re far too tanned for a New Yorker, still a ‘California Gal’ I guess.” This last part he said rather loudly. In spite of myself I felt a glow. I adored New York, but I liked to remind people that I wasn’t a New Yorker, not just another pretty woman in pretty clothes. I was an exotic – a westerner who could

play in their field. He sussed that out right away and played it loud. Truman had spent some time in California – more specifically Hollywood. He was glad to be out of it too.

“It isn’t even a city.” He complained, “It’s nothing. Like a jumble of huts in a jungle somewhere. Completely dead.” I laughed heartily. Everyone looked over.

Quietly, he told me about his mother and how her beauty and style could not save her, how troubled she was, chastising, abandoning him, and, worst of all, loving him, in turns. How, when he was just a boy, she’d made a custody deal with his father, that left him with poor relations in Monroeville, Alabama year round. In the original custodial arrangement, young Truman was to spend three months of every year with his father, and nine months with his mother and her new husband. His father, bitter and jealous of his ex-wife’s new found happiness, didn’t want his son to be with the ‘dago-bastard,’ but was content to give up his custody, if she gave up hers. We bonded over stories of our fathers. Unlike mine, his was not physically abusive, yet both were emotional stumps.

Two years after our conversation, Nina Capote swallowed a stack of Seconal. Tru was devastated. He was in Europe when he got the news. I had just been there with him the week before.

He returned home from Europe immediately, utterly distraught by her death. We met in the Oak Room at the Plaza after her memorial service – the wood paneling evokes a confessional atmosphere. At twenty-nine, he looked only eighteen – his complexion fresh, his eyes clear, despite his grief. He mustn’t have been drinking very much then. How else could one explain that great skin.

“A military school? What did she think would happen?” Even now, he was still incredulous that his mom had sent him to St. John’s Military academy to toughen him up. I tried to pay attention though he was wallowing a bit. I was a good friend to him. I didn’t deserve his later treatment.

“It was kind of like tossing a sand crab to a flock of sea gulls.” I answered after a pause.

“A sand crab?” He questioned, bemused.

“You’re prettier of course.” I laughed. He preened and then giggled.

“Fair metaphor. I was prey. The boys at St. John’s took sex very seriously, not just your basic belly rubs. It was like I was in prison. There is always some young, pretty convict that everyone is after.”

“And you were it?”

He nodded.

“Did you tell her?”

He twisted his mouth. “She would have blamed me. “My ‘unnatural ways’ bringing this world of hurt on both of us. How she suffered, I do not know.”

“She must have seen how unhappy you were?” I was a great judge of motherhood - lousy example - but a great judge.

“She dropped by once, maybe twice. I suspect she was so eager to get back home once she’d made the journey, she wouldn’t have noticed if I’d been bleeding from the head. She didn’t even comment on the fact that I deepened my voice, after she’d pestered me for ages to do so.”

“Deepened it?” I questioned, listening to him now, no one would accuse him of a masculine inflection.

“I switched back.”

“Ahh,” I replied, giggling. “Still, she took you out, finally.”

”Yes, yes, yes, poor darling. What a disappointment for little Lillie Mae.”

Truman’s mother’s real name was Lillie Mae. When she married her second husband Joe Capote and moved to Manhattan, she adopted the more citified Nina for her sophisticated island friends. When Truman disparaged her, he used her banished country name, taunting her in absentia. Now that she was dead, the name sounded too personal, too intimate to be bandied about a cocktail table, even the Plaza’s. “Imagine all that money spent and still only a sissy-faggot son to show for it – only I was now an experienced sissy-fag thanks to the Academy.” He gave a slight laugh.

We never really know our mothers. Few of us even think to imagine them. I never gave Cecily a chance to know me. Nope, even now, lost in the bowels of Hell I just can’t pretend to feel sorry. I just didn’t care for her, that’s it. At least I didn’t pretend like Truman’s Lillie Mae did.

Like everyone who knew Truman then, I was entranced. He wasn’t just brilliant, he was a scream. A thrilling conversationalist, when he led with his vulnerabilities, you were riveted. It was less a gift, than a skill. The easiest way to find out a secret is to share one - yours, if no one else’s is available, he once told me.

Even my notoriously stiff boyfriend Lord Roan Appleby, who wandered into my bedroom one night – quite by accident I assure you, he was more of an early riser if you

catch my drift – to discover Truman giving me a foot massage on the bed, decided Tru was a lark. Made voluble by two bottles of Courvosier and Truman’s clever handling, Roan and Truman compared boarding school sex rites. I listened in amazement to Roan share intimacies with a near stranger. It was so un-British, it bordered on treason.

“Lets do keep him Sunny; we can pop him up on the mantle and take him down when we want to play.”

A few days after our first meeting at Diana’s Truman pursued my acquaintance with an invitation to lunch at *La Côte Basque*, then tea at the Russian Tea Room, drinks at the El Mo et cetera. Soon, we were full-blown friends. Though I teased him about being a pet to society matrons, I learned he was an asset to have around. There was no place he was unwelcome, no person he could not charm.

One time Babe invited him over for an intimate luncheon. Really intimate – just Tru, Babe and me. That’s how accepted he’d become. Anyway, we were in the midst of being very girly – polishing each other’s toenails on her lush Persian rugs. Tru gave a marvelous pedicure and was not above experimenting with a little colored varnish on his toes. It was about 2:00 in the afternoon. Babe and I lured him from his work, not something he’d let us do often, but he’d been feeling rather blue after the collapse of yet another unsatisfying love affair. We were having a heated debate on what was being termed ‘Vintage Clothing.’ Tru said it was the belle mode for the young, working girl. Not his usual subject, but he’d been branching out of late.

“It’s too fabulous; think of it – well-preserved Schiaparelli at a sliver of the price, it’s very chic. And accessible.”

“Accessibility has little to recommend itself, especially in fashion.” Babe knew of what she spoke having topped the best-dressed list more times than a Kennedy tops a waitress.

“It’s simply too complicated,” I offered. “I don’t want to shop here and there, putting together my look. I want to go to Henri Bendel and have him do it for me. I don’t want to assemble like a common stylist need.”

They were both about to launch into me over the use of the snotty word ‘common’ when Babe’s big sister Betsy Whitney showed up.

You’ve heard of the Cushing sisters of course - Betsy, Babe and Minnie. Minnie married an Astor, and then inexplicably – at least to her mother - ditched Vincent and his 24-carat name and married that second-rate homo artist, James Fosburgh. He was society, but no where near the Astor cash or cache. Minnie wasn’t exactly a girly-girl, so no doubt she was happy to pursue her interests within a more bohemian marriage. Babe married Standard Oil before she hooked up with Bill, and Betsy, well; Betsy got the prize in the Cracker Jack box. She traded a Roosevelt for a Whitney, really for *the* Whitney. Jock was not only deliciously handsome, as waspy as they come and bright - he was literally drenched in cash. Needless to say Mama Cushing struck gold with all her girls and mined it well.

When Betsy was announced Babe was stricken. But consummate hostess, she wouldn’t let it show to Truman she didn’t think he’d do for her Old Guard sister. This is

really funny because Babe had no problem bringing him to C.Z. Guest's house whenever an invitation arrived. C.Z., as Brahmin as it gets, multiplied it by marrying into the Phipps fortune. But Betsy could be quite forbidding; remember this woman spent most of her first marriage on the bad side of Eleanor Roosevelt and lived to suppress the tale. With great aplomb Babe stood, Kleenex crunched between every toe, and told Sally to show her sister in.

"Betsy darling, how delightful," Babe said coolly as Betsy walked in, looking like a Mainbocher spread in Town and Country, "Sit down dearest, we're just having a pajama party sans the p.j.s" Babe turned to her maid, "Sally, our tea things please." We'd been drinking vodka in Babe's china cups till then. Then she turned back to Betsy, "You will stay for tea."

Betsy nodded, still standing, staring directly at Tru, who looked particularly tiny, scrunched on the floor with his pink toes in front of him. Still a polite Southern boy, Truman would not speak until introduced to the great Mrs. Whitney. So he peered up at her with shining eyes. He looked about eleven.

"Betsy, I don't believe you've met my dear, dear friend Truman Capote." I began, noticing that for once my socially sensitive Babe was flummoxed. "Tru-heart this is Babe's sister, Betsy Whitney—"

"How do you do?" Tru followed my lead, choosing to remain seated, but grinning up at her, not giving her a chance to answer. "You disapprove don't you, I knew it. I could tell from you're face the moment you walked in. Well I just don't care; Babe was, after all, an editor at Vogue, if she tells me to Think Pink, then pink it is. Although I must

admit I was leaning to maroon, which looks perfectly fabulous on you.” And with that he stood, tissue tucked between his toes. He took her hand to inspect her nails. “Philippe, right? I can tell by the cuticles. Philippe has this philosophy – ignore the cuticles and they will never bother you. Ha! Look at your sore little thumb here. That cuticle is obviously bothering you. My mother used to have the same trouble, sit down now, let me take care of this for you.” Mesmerized by ‘this pocket-sized Merlin,’ Betsy sat down on the chintz sofa, removed her pumps, and tucked her toes under her. He carefully removed her nail polish and repaired her manicure. Soon we traded tea for martinis and were properly pissed by the time Bill walked through the door.

What fun oh, what fun. I love nail varnish. Did you notice the tea-cups? They were Limoge. The ones on the sideboard to the left were Queen Victoria’s. Babe never used them, but we admired them often.

Chapter Seventeen

The memory I usually share, when people ask – and they always ask – of Truman Capote takes place in 1961 at 969 Fifth Avenue in Lee and Stas Radziwill's *much* decorated duplex. It was June and I had known Tru about six years. Are you with me? It was three days after my forty-fifth birthday. Everyone was getting ready to head to their summer homes and plan their 'affair' season. Lee threw a 'teeny tiny party for under a thousand' - people not dollars - Lee couldn't have tea for two for under a thousand bucks. That woman went through money faster than she went through men. She gave old Pammy Churchill a run for it. Of course Lee did it within the confines of marriage, to a Prince no less – a real one too, but Polish so who cares. Dumpy little Pam didn't learn to be a marriage closer - till she closed in on mine, the whore. Anyway where was I? Oh, yes Truman.

Truman loathed Gore Vidal, not such a surprise really, Gore was an arrogant beast, a clever essayist yes, but quelle prick! His artistic talent was exceeded only by his ability to shit upon virtually everyone he met, just for the love of it. As for Truman he was particularly venomous, going out of his way to be a bitch. At first they quite liked each other. Sharing many similarities, including an alcoholic mother named Nina. They were both young and spiky with ambition. They lunched at the Plaza, discussing their outsized plans for the future. A clash was not long in coming, however. According to rumor, which was often a more reliable source than Truman himself, the rumble began at Tennessee Williams' over who was the better writer. Naturally they found no resolution

and whatever nasty words were said stuck like a tick to a dog's ear. They never found common ground again.

Even though Gore was persona non grata at the Whitehouse – supposedly he'd picked on or perhaps hit on Jackie or was it little Bobby – ooh can you picture that - a man hitting on an Alpha Kennedy male? Good golly what fun to see - Gore was wholeheartedly welcomed at Lee's. It seemed Lee would pick up big sister Jackie's leftovers, especially if they would badmouth America's favorite first lady. And rumor had it, Gore would.

Now Truman was no slouch in the bitchery department himself, but he appeared rather intimidated by the great Vidal - weird really, because he had no respect for him as a writer. But, Gore was related to Lee loosely. Being in Lee's duplex no doubt held Truman back, it was his first time there.

The duplex itself was hideous. Lee fancied herself a talented decorator and even had some success at it for a while, but she was no Billy Baldwin. The space was overwrought with flowery fabrics tracked on the walls, sofas, curtains, bowls and jars - anything you could name. Every time I walked in I practically sneezed. For first-timers, the place was a side-show of conspicuous consumption, for Truman it was material. By the window in the parlor Lee'd trapped a couple of orange canaries in a Victorian Pagoda. Poor Tru, thinking he could escape the cacophony of the canaries and other manner of birds clogging the parlor, ducked into the library. There he nearly collapsed into an antique cage suspended from the ceiling holding a myna bird. Naturally he squeaked. Anybody else would have shrieked but Truman was a squeaker, a by-product

of the high-pitched voice he'd cultivated to piss his mama off some years back. Well Pretty, the massive lime-green parrot across from the myna bird, shrieked back. Dazed by the onslaught, Truman squealed "fuck you" to the parrot. In return, the parrot solidly cussed him in Polish for the better part of ten minutes. Years later, Tru, as a tribute to the eloquent bird, hung a papier-mâché parrot in his United Nations apartment

Gore and I watched the display with amusement from our vantage point salon-side on the pansy-choked sofa. Gore hissed in derision at Truman's crime of newness loud enough for everyone to hear. Truman felt ridiculous and out of his depth among the Kennedy relations, he later confided. Truman had been rubbing shoulders with the rarefied since before the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948 - it was a talent of his - but this was still his first time in Lee's home. And Gore bleeds a deep, British blue you see, and was related by marriage to Jackie and Lee. Anyway Gore threw off some jazzy line about social-climbing low-rent Southerners and their lack of breeding - "Not you of course, Truman" - it was strictly a second rate jibe. But like most of Vidal's insults, it's not what he says but whom he says it in front of. Truman was besotted with Lee and the whole glitzy Kennedy thing - even the Bay of Pigs fiasco, two months earlier, didn't tarnish that administration socially. Nobody wanted to get naked with Castro when Ike was in office either. Any other time, Truman would have bitch-slapped Gore without so much as a smile to indicate he'd enjoyed it. But Gore held him at a disadvantage; Truman did not wish to offend Lee. So now he wanted revenge.

We left the Radziwills' fairly early to head to the Four Season's Pool Room between Park and Lex for a nightcap. Lately, Lee's Prince Stas transformed into an ass

after nine. I suspect it was the Dr. Feelgood injections he'd been introduced to by his brother-in-law, the commander-in-chief. I don't have anything morally against drugs God knows; I simply prefer my cocktails in Rosenthal.

"Countess, I'm going to give that nasty cock-sucker, Vidal, the clap," Truman told me once we were safely lodged in my limousine.

We drove past the Frick. It was drizzly outside. Fifth eased before us like spilt ink. Spring leaves and maple seeds dotted the sidewalk by the Central Park like daubs of watercolor. My little Tru-love wasn't even pretending not to seethe.

I touched his still-skinny knee lightly, "Darling, I don't think sleeping with him is the best revenge. Truly, you aren't really diseased are you?"

"Nooo!" He shook my hand away – a certain indication of how out of sorts he was. Truman was extremely affectionate by nature. "I'm not going to sleep with him, my silly Contessa, I am going to telegraph Sister Parish, who is *still* decorating the White House and say 'Isn't it awful about poor Gore?' naturally she's going to want to know what in the world I'm talking about, and so, of course, will Jackie and Jack."

I shook my head and gazed appreciatively at the lush trees lining the east side of the park. Throughout their lives, Truman and Gore would battle it out, culminating in the lawsuit that damn near killed what was left of Truman's career, at least incidentally, but that was still so far away.

"Truman, really, it's one thing to spread gossip, quite another to spread lies."

“Darlin’,” he said, affecting a hayseed accent. “Y’all just wait and you wait, then you wait some more, and if you wait long enough it *all* comes true.” And it usually did. Of course, even when it didn’t come true he still wrote about it.

He was the *it* boy of New York society, and had charmed his way into the salons of the Upper East Side thanks to the success of some short stories and his first novel. Actually, even before his 1st novel, it was his charismatic personality really. There were lots of young writers around. It was New York, after all. Most of them were far more accomplished than Truman. Yet he had a way. It started with an article in *Life* magazine and dinner at Bennett Cerf’s, his Random House Publisher. Phyllis and Bennett were having a black tie dinner party, and since she was short of men – the New York hostess’ dilemma - she told Bennett to invite some of his Random House authors. He did, and as the guests were arriving the butler appeared and asked, “Are you expecting a child?” Phyllis said no.

Bennett overheard and blurted out, “That must be Truman Capote!” and rushed to greet him. Truman came up the stairs looking perhaps two-thirds of his twenty or so years.

One of the guests quipped, “Really things could not be so bad that Phyllis has to bring her own child to the table in a dinner jacket!”

This pretty, little boy façade, with a grown-up’s wit and intelligence was a yummy combination. All the Upper East Side ladies were drawn to him Truman boasted later. He regaled them with his tales of fortune-tellers and bragged that he could foresee the future.

“He was just so delightful and fresh,” Phyllis said. “From then on he was never without dinner plans.”

Chapter Eighteen

Have I told you about how Babe and Bill Paley were introduced to Truman? Oh I know, it's thrashing about a bit in the tale, but we mustn't get bored. I need to savor these moments of lucidity when I can actually watch my life. I do believe I get these moments of sights and sounds only to make the rest of my cocoon-like state more horrifying. Most of the time I am trapped in an in-between nightmare-like state.

Do you remember nightmares you knew were only nightmares so you willed your subconscious to awaken? Hell is like that most of the time for me – except for these brief episodes – only I don't wish to wake up because I am aware that the reality of endless Hell is worse than the nightmare I am having – at least my nightmares have images. I know those of you familiar with Dante's Hell will scoff at mine. How benign you no doubt think. You are wrong. For a woman who has never relied so heavily on her mind for entertainment, a woman who never looked outside herself for color and excitement to be constrained in nothingness is grim indeed. I would trade my hell for Dante's color and pain and creatures in a moment – anything but this slow, glaring suffocation of the mind.

Now before I start I must dish some background on The Paleys – and make no mistake, they were *The* Paleys. Tell the truth. Aren't you a bit relieved to be talking about someone else for a change? If I was getting bored with me – and I adore me, I can only imagine how you must be feeling. Anyway the Paleys - everyone knew them. Babe was,

of course, stunning and intensely stylish. Bill was utterly dreamy and had the bank book to prove it. But as I mentioned, poor Billy was a Jew. And not just a quiet, dust-it-under-the-carpet-been-in-America-long-enough-to-assimilate-Jew; his was a Jewish immigrant background. Now you'd think he banked enough green to carpet the way to social acceptance, right? Not a chance, not enough farthings in the United Kingdom to broker that deal. When Barbara Cushing Mortimer, a.k.a. Babe, wed William Paley, the CBS Board Chairman, in 1947, she was attended by her two sisters, the oldest, Minnie a.k.a. Mrs. Vincent Astor, and Betsy, the lovely Mrs. Jock Whitney. Strictly A-list. Babe suffered a social tumble for Bill. Too naïve to see this at first, she was blindsided by the rejection. It did seem inexplicable - her social credentials were impeccable. How could she have envisioned her bloodline and Bill's would be averaged out by the loftiest Old guard? Hell, she was dropped from the Register. Mama Cushing tried to warn daughter Babe about his wasp-deficiency, but money can buy complacency. Soon the old Guard labeled Bill and Babe social *climbers*. What a laugh.

Their social rejection led to our friendship after I met husband number two, Christian. I was never high society, society certainly - but Café. However, high society's death knell could be heard by a savvy few like Truman. Tru may even have fired the fatal shot. For many it would clang with finality at his Black and White ball. But that was still years away. When the Paley's met Truman his power over society was not yet fully realized. Until then, Café was peopled with those who wrote, acted, painted successfully or were chic and beautiful and wonderfully funny. Christian was an extremely successful Broadway producer, and I was chic, beautiful and bitchy. We were well-entrenched.

Christian and I began including Tru in virtually everything we did. The meeting at Vreeland's led to many meals about town. Christian, the poppet, loved Tru just as much as I did. Truman had been doing his home work, working hard, not just on society, but at his day job, resident genius.

In January 1955, the Paley's invited us to their home in Round Hill, Jamaica. I called Babe when I received the invitation. She wasn't home, so I was passed to Bill. "Honey, would you mind terribly if Christian and I brought Truman along?"

Bill, ever the status-seeker, said "By all means, it would be an honor."

I was surprised, but pleased. Bill was more familiar with social currents and trends than I'd guessed. I hadn't expected him to say no, but I hadn't expected him to consider it an honor either.

You should have seen Bill's face when he peeked behind Christian and me while we boarded the private Paley plane. Both he and Babe were astounded and disappointed to see the wee word wizard boarding with us rather than Mr. President Harry Truman. I hooted with laughter when I cobbled together their hopes and shared them with Truman much to Babe and Bill's embarrassment.

But they didn't know Tru. He laughed the loudest, and then offered himself up as entertainment. "I can't do Harry – not even Harry does a good Harry. However, I do a bully Roosevelt." He quipped, launching into a scene featuring the faux Teddy Roosevelt from *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Babe and Bill were delighted. After we'd all been served up

enough alcohol to keep aloft for a week, Babe and Tru settled down for a soulful chat. I have no idea what was said but by the end of it she and Tru were intimates. Bill liked him too, but in a different way. He saw Truman as another connection – someone to enhance his own importance. Plus, he was a helluva lot of fun. Babe and Tru shared a kinship even I felt excluded from though I was an intimate of both. I loved Babe, but was possessive over my little Tru-love.

Lunching at the Colony years later, in 1960, Babe and I tried to suss out the strength of his appeal in a rare moment of candor.

“Remember that line Scarlett utters when she first sees Rhett Butler. ‘He looks as if he knows what I look lak without my bloomers on,’” Babe did a terrible Scarlett O’Hara. Have you ever noticed Bostonians can’t feign a southern accent ? I do believe it’s a point of pride.

“It’s just as well Bill has already made his fortune; you were made for neither stage nor screen,” I responded.

“It’s the same for me,” she said, ignoring my teasing. “Not sexually, of course. But if you meet someone who sees through the artifice and still enjoys you, you can mentally relax. I feel at ease with him, more than I do with you or Bill or even my own children - especially with my own children.” Babe’s notoriously awkward relationships with her offspring mirrored my own with Cecily. Babe, kinder than I, kept trying much longer than I did.

“He never judges me.”

“Nor do I,” I lied.

“Liar.”

“Perhaps.”

“You can’t help it. You’re a woman. You hold me up and measure yourself against me. Or, you hold yourself up and measure me against you Whatever suits the mood you’re in. It’s what we do. Who’s prettier?”

At this, I shook my head so vehemently the waiter brought another mimosa over. “I never wonder that,” I answered truthfully. “You are, hands down. Everyone says so. You know it yourself.”

“But how do you justify that? If you allow I am prettier you must have some form of compensation. For example, ‘Babe is prettier, but she tries so hard at it poor darling. I could be too if I cared that much.’” She looked keenly in my eyes. “It’s okay.” She smiled at me, “We all do it. Look at who we are race horses bred by the men in our lives. Why is it so surprising when we race?” Her pretty eyes hardened. “Who’s cleverer?”

I gulped the mimosa in a very unladylike fashion, entirely unused to this level of candor with Babe.

“You think you are of course. That’s your compensation. As a matter of fact I do too. And that’s why we like each other - an unusual thing in our circle. You grant me my area and I grant you yours. But with Tru there’s no competition. I can be the cleverest with him - you, the most beautiful. He doesn’t expect the usual things that men expect from me either. I don’t plump his pillows, ensure the sheets are Frette, the wine, vintage, the chocolate, Belgian and so on.”

“Is it because he’s homosexual?” I injected, stubbing my cigarette out.

“Perhaps that’s what it comes down to.” She shrugged elegantly.

What it came down to was that he was a writer. He expected different stuff – the details. And Babe, like God, was in the details.

Babe, Truman and I were inseparable for nearly two decades. For Bill and Babe, Truman gave as good as he got. He polished their gloss. He was their court jester, their party favor. One attended their events because one would have a marvelous time. And one had a marvelous time because Truman was a delightful entertainer. When needed, he’d ratchet up the social tension between his swans to create a buzz in the room, cashing in on what Babe described as our horse racing by setting one against the other. *Le petit* prick. For Babe and Bill, their status grew as the Old Guard’s diminished and died. They had Truman to thank.

Does it occur to you watching this that my best moments are actually someone else’s? As independent as I pretended to be, at least in my own mind, I really don’t seem

to be able to support life on my own. Look at it: the glitter of Death Valley - not my glitter but Bill and Warner's, the affair with Gable, the affair wasn't really that thrilling – the idea of Rhett Butler was, and Truman. Truman stories are so good, so delicious – I really just need to concentrate on the images. Keep my expectations low, why look for meaning when it doesn't matter anymore? But still. . . I did so want to tell *my* story.

Chapter Nineteen

“Moscow? Isn’t there some drafty battle going on?” I separated my bacon from my filet.

“Yes darling, the Cold War is what the locals call it, I believe,” replied Christian, the wit.

“Truly Chris darling, you should write. I know about the cold war - I mean aren’t the Russians fighting somebody or other? Isn’t it dangerous right now?”

“From what I understand the *Soviets* are always in a bad temper, hence the need for all that vodka,” Christian grimaced.

“If all I had to do is sit around all day drink endless shots of vodka, wear fabulous furs and feast on caviar, I wouldn’t be bad-tempered at all,” Truman interjected. “That’s the problem with Communism; it sucks the joy out of everything.” He scooped a copious amount of cocktail sauce with a jumbo shrimp.

“Why do you suppose all the chefs in Manhattan cut their vegetables into shamrocks? Was there a decree, made on a high frequency, only restaurants receive?” He queried.

“Lord knows darling, but it’s too precious for words. It’s simply unnatural to eat oversized, orange clover,” I replied. “And frankly I’m surprised at Sardis; it’s never been about the food before. Why get fancy now?”

“Pressure, the terrible pressure to find something attractive that won’t pack the poundage on the Lunts I suppose,” Truman replied.

“Is Lynn dieting again? Good golly, when was the last time that woman ate a square meal?”

“Christian who are you waving to? Oh no, darling, really. Good grief, now she’s coming over - quick Tru-love pretend you’re choking on something revolting.” On cue Truman started hacking theatrically, fingers clutching his throat, pretending a shrimp’s tail had got stuck. The *maitre’d* hurried over and Ann Woodward, disturbed by the commotion drifted away.

“Oh, its okay Maurice, he was only pretending,” I assured the *maitre’d*. “We were just playing a little joke on a friend.” Maurice, befuddled, but relieved left the table.

“You two are really incorrigible. She would have just stopped by to chat for a minute,” Christian scolded, patting his lips to remove the stains of garlic butter.

“Speaking of dieting...” Truman leaned in to whisper.

“Really?” I responded, “Well, she does have the loveliest figure.”

“That’s why she has to watch it, especially since the report came out.” Vintage Truman here, begging the question.

“What report?” Christian and I whispered in unison. We sat back as the waiter removed out plates, then, excruciatingly slowly, decrumbed the table. I suspect he wanted to know too. Wait staff know everything.

“The Cum report.” Truman’s face shone, alight with full-blown devilment.

“The what?” I asked.

Truman snickered, delighting in my naiveté: “You know, cum, spunk, jism, penile fluids.”

“Oh,” I said. I felt my eyes widen. Christian and Truman looked amused and smug in their worldliness. Trying to hide my shock, I asked grandly, “And what did this, Cum Report, have to say?”

Truman laughed merrily, “Well, it said it was fattening.”

I roared with laughter. “So, naturally, the Woodward tart cuts out the food.”

“Naturally,” Truman nodded.

“Now enough, both of you. Elsie, her mother-in-law, has been known to invest in a production of mine from time to time. We like very rich people remember,” Christian scolded.

I straightened the collar of Truman’s red velvet vest for him. His ordeal had left him decidedly disheveled.

“You are very rich people, I thought,” Truman retorted, sipping his vodka and smiling with pleasure.

Christian and I looked at each other, grinning and simultaneously said, “I thought you were going to tell him.”

“So sorry Truman, we’ve wanted to tell for such a long time now,” Christian began.

“It’s a terrible step-down for you.” I piped in.

“A shock really, but please don’t fall apart right there in your seat, God knows what Cholly will say, he’s only two seats over.” Christian threw a glance over his shoulder.

We leaned in together and stage-whispered. “We are actually, simply . . . rich.”

“Yes,” I continued in a louder voice, “And not a farthing beyond I’m afraid, it’s rather shameful.”

“My goodness, when did this happen? How horrible for you both,” Truman affected dismay at our disclosure.

“Well, sweetheart, it’s always been this way. We just hoped you wouldn’t notice, but now that we’ve introduced you to the Paleys. . .”

“And you’ve met the Agnellis...”

“Soon you’ll meet the Mellons. . .”

“And the Astors.”

“Well, we knew it would be obvious, so we thought we’d better ‘fess up. Before the competition for your company really gets vicious. We can’t offer up yacht trips every time we want to you to spend the weekend with us,” I squeezed his knee.

Tru reached for his wallet, “You know, I’ll help out if I can,” he said, thumbing through, “Will a tenner do for now? I, myself, fall in the *artiste* category.”

“That brings us back to Moscow,” Christian nodded to the waiter, who promptly arrived tableside, to take our dessert order.

“How can Moscow compare with a yacht, darling?” I asked.

“Have either of you ever been to Moscow?”

We both shook are heads.

“How many times have you been on a yacht?” Truman and I shrugged.

“Exactly. This is new and different - essential for a writer and for a world traveler.”

Christian had gotten himself entangled with the Everyman Opera. They performed Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* around the world. At Christmastime - noticing some warmth leaking out of the cold war - the mostly black troupe planned a trip to a place they'd never dared go before, Moscow. Performances were scheduled to start January 10, 1956. This would be the first American company to perform in Russia since the Bolshevik Revolution.

His interest piqued, Truman sat back in his chair as the waiter placed his *Crème Brulee* down. "What did you have in mind?"

"Publicity mainly, but not just a newspaper clipping here or there – a long piece in a respectable rag. The New Yorker or something – you've got the connections."

Tru laughed, he looked over at the man, the latest incarnation of Cholly Knickerbocker, the Hearst gossip columnist, sitting two tables over and asked, "Would the Gershwins be coming?"

"Yes, I expect so."

"And you and Sunny?"

"Just try to keep me home," I replied. This drafty battle now seemed pretty interesting.

"Would I have unfettered access?"

"I don't see why not." Ha! Christian would see later.

"Write a travel log?" He picked up his spoon and tapped the crust of his *brulee*. Exquisitely hard, just the way he liked it.

"In a way," Christian replied.

With one swift flick of his wrist he cracked the crust. “I see it as more of a diary, the adventures of a heroic, traveling company bringing proof of freedom and liberty to a nation plunged in darkness.” The light in his eyes flickered with excitement as he warmed to the topic.

“Shall we toast to freedom, liberty and the American Way?” I laughed.

“Indeed, vodka for everyone,” Christian commanded.

The New Yorker agreed to publish the story for Truman and pay his expenses.

Babe Paley kitted him out with cold-weather gear from Abercrombie & Fitch. I purchased us matching yellow cashmere scarves four times the normal width. In East Berlin we boarded the *Blue Express* which took us to the frosty middle of the Soviet Union. *Porgy and Bess* planned to open the day after Christmas in Leningrad, and then we’d be off to Moscow.

We were terribly excited. When we reached Leningrad we were met by a man from the Ministry of Culture, whose hopes for a further thawing of the cold war were even greater than ours. “Your visit is a step forward in the march toward peace,” he began. “When the cannons are heard, the muses are silent; when the cannons are silent, the muses are heard.” From that Truman found his title: *The Muses are Heard*.

Truman had a clear picture from the beginning of what this piece would be. He told us, “I want it to be very Russian, not in the sense of being reminiscent of Russian writing, but rather of some Czarist *objet*, a Faberge contrivance, one of his music boxes, say, that trembled with some glittering, precise, mischievous melody.”

Comedy was not exactly what Christian had in mind, but he'd promised unfettered access. The performers were delightful and lively, generally more concerned with their own ambitions than lofty political ideals. Two even planned to be married in Moscow, hoping for special coverage, "The first couple of Negro Americans married in Moscow. That's front page. That's T.V."

Along with us, there were the Breens. Arlen Breen acted as the director of the company; Leonard Lyons, the columnist for the New York Post; and Mr. and Mrs. Gershwin, soon to be lampooned in literature.

Lyons first sniffed trouble afoot. He took me aside one evening early on and whispered, "Is Truman planning something really evil?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He can be quite evil, that's why he's so much fun, but he is a professional, a serious writer." I replied, and meant it too.

Lyons nodded, doubt apparent on his face.

Traveling with Truman was always a lark. The Soviets had no idea what to make of him. Wrapped in the oversized scarf I had given him or in the red equally dramatic scarf Lenore Gershwin had bestowed, he looked like a bespectacled babushka. In *The Muses Are Heard* he describes how we Americans were greeted with suspicion and stares. The truth, of course, was that Truman was greeted in the Soviet streets with stares and suspicion, just as he was back on the soil of freedom and liberty. One particularly memorable time, as we were walking past the Astoria our hotel in Leningrad, the locals giggled and pointed at him. Animated in the extreme and never at a loss for words, he walked up to them and said,

“Laugh, you dreary people. But what will you do for laughs next week when I’m gone from here?”

Did he like the attention? Indeed, he courted it. One day, Christian and I were talking with the Breens and the hotel manager in the lobby. Truman arrived at the top of the marble staircase wearing a fur-lined cape he’d purchased for a song. The hotel manager stopped talking and turned his full attention to Truman’s grand descent. Taking each step as if he were to be crowned upon reaching the landing, he seemed to survey us all in the lobby as his subjects. He walked right past us and zipped through the revolving door. Then, when we were about to resume speaking, he reappeared, having gone full circle through the door, kicked his heel in our direction and disappeared. The hotel manager responded, “We have them like that in the Soviet Union, but we hide them.”

Yet, wherever we ended up, no matter what part of the world, Truman made friends. His celebrity preceded him, even in Russia. An English professor at the University of Leningrad came to the hotel to meet him and took him out for a night of carousing. They returned in the wee hours, thoroughly soused. Boris the Bunny, as Truman nicknamed his professor, deposited Truman on our doorstep. Christian, bleary-eyed but kind-hearted created a makeshift bed for Truman in the tub, thoughtfully propping him upright, so if he vomited he wouldn’t choke.

The article grew to be a book, and a hilarious one at that. Written in first person, it was simply Truman talking, bitching, and gossiping. The New Yorker published it in two issues in October of 1956, and Random House published it in hard cover - though it was a relatively short 52,000 words - at the end of the year. The critics loved it. Christian and I

loved it, mainly because we got off light. Truman's formidable literary gaze held us in esteem and affection. The Breens and Gershwins, however, were terribly miffed. They thought Christian had been utterly irresponsible to let a writer in our midst. Christian pointed out that they had invited Lyons. They protested that Lyons was a real journalist, what Truman had done was not accurate. This was only partly true. He fiddled with some of the events and even made up a few - but he nailed us, dead-on.

Mostly because he asked questions people answered. No matter how nastily he asked them. He built up that level of trust very skillfully and very quickly.

"Does it bother you that you are such a shitty mother?" he smiled, then twisted his mouth to one side, watching for my reaction. I didn't answer right away, so he tried again. "Motherhood often redeems even the most self-absorbed."

"Didn't work for your mommy," I retorted.

"Perhaps if I'd been a girl..." he replied and then his gaze fell from mine to the ground. Immediately I felt guilty.

"I was hoping for a boy," I said.

"You don't get to decide," he sounded angry.

"Still, I wanted a boy."

"Do you think you would have treated a boy better, differently?"

I nodded.

"I suppose you're not really lying, if you're lying to yourself. Tell me about motherhood. Lillie Mae had no money, an absent husband and she was a child herself.

You had a chance at motherhood in the very easiest circumstances and you still fucked it up.”

I inhaled deeply before replying.

“True, wealth wasn’t an issue. I just didn’t like it. The neediness. Puppies aren’t so needy, why are babies?”

“She was too needy?”

“Yes and not at all pretty. I like pretty things and pretty people. Also one day I caught a glimpse of myself as her footnote. Like Mutti is to me. Mutti’s my background, my wall paper. It is not a pleasant experience when you’re the one on the wall.”

“Wall paper,” he repeated.

“Yes, I looked at her and began to see myself through her moments. Her first birthday, I’d blow the candle for her. Her first step, I’d hold her hand. Her first day at school, I’d, I don’t know, do whatever thing mothers are supposed to do. Strictly a supporting role - existing only through her needs. And it wasn’t as if I had a job or some other kind of defining role, so I would recede. Motherhood is about receding. I was twenty-eight; I had no desire to recede.” It felt good to talk about this, indulgent. No one had ever asked before. Now I was sitting up, cross-legged on my beach towel, lighting myself a cigarette.

I was staying at his god-awful house in Florida, privately vowing never to return. People with true chic can never really like Florida – it’s the teal polyester of states. Truman not only asked the most interesting questions, to his credit he listened. He really listened. I thought it was to understand me.

“I suppose I opted out. I hired nannies and left her to them. I wasn’t finished with my life and this way she could have a life uncluttered by my resentfulness. It is better for her.”

“I’ll bet that’s just what Lillie Mae said to herself too as she dumped me at that military school, or before that, when she dumped me on her family.”

“Before you indict us both on the same charges, I would like to point out that I’ve never messed with Cecily. I never played that push-me, pull-me crap with her your mother did with you. I never demanded her love or promised mine. I simply left her alone, I am not cruel. And she’s survived much better than I anticipated, She’s in college. My decision is obviously the right one. Can you imagine it? Me, at home with her daily, attempting to be maternal? I would have been a colossal bitch to her. I don’t have any patience for the stupid or foolish. Children are nothing if not stupid and foolish. I like the games adults play. Tiddly winks is not my style.” I drew deeply on my cigarette, reflecting on my words, enjoying this cathartic examination of my faults.

“I get irritated when I’m sick, but when someone around me is ill, it pisses me off. I expect them to take the same measures I do to remedy the situation – a double martini, aspirin and a dark boudoir. Two-year-olds are not so accommodating. I’m sure I would have been far more damaging than loving nannies.”

“They weren’t all so loving,” Tru replied.

I wasn’t sure if he referred to his former caretakers or Cecily’s.

Chapter Twenty

Tru spent considerable time in Italy during the late 50's. The solitude offered him a far more congenial work environment than frenetic Manhattan. However, almost immediately upon arrival he issued dozens of invitations imploring friends and foe alike to visit him as soon as possible. I didn't know that everyone had received an invitation. Naturally, I was flattered and had never been to Rome. Christian was working so much I entertained the idea of going alone. This was the first missive:

We [he and Jack Dunphy, his long term beau] decided to spend the winter here in Rome and have found, I must say, a beautiful apartment, a dream really. Our apartment is very sunny and charming. We have a first-rate cook! Everything is so different from Taorimina (the spot he and Jack had stayed in previous years) - I guess this is the first time in my life I've ever lived the way I really want to-such a pity I can't afford it. I would be a very happy boy if it weren't so outrageously expensive, and I am next door to penniless. If you hear of anyone that wants an article about Rome (or horticulture, hair styles, Famous People I Have Known) send them my way. "

I didn't respond to this first letter, because as much as I loved Truman, Jack Dunphy, Truman's lover, was a tough, often nasty nut. However, when I got the next letter, sans salutations, beginning with "*Many's the night I've trudged down to the post office, then trudged back empty-handed, thinking, a fine pal she is, whirling from one gay event to another, never giving a thought to poor Truman: far off there on a windswept*

hill, with nothing but the sound of his pencil scratching to cheer him up. Oh chillin, it do get mighty powerful lonesome here. There is no fresh gossip – by the time anyone sends me some it's moldier than balled up socks in a rain puddle. I have been reduced, my darling Contessa, to inventing a game of recycling rumors. It's not very educational, but it does have its compensations – you can slander people left and right all in the interest of le sport.

I could barely imagine what that mind would come up with left to his own devices too long. I turned the page to continue reading, *It's called IDC, which stands for International Daisy Chain. You make a chain of names, each one connected by the fact that he or she has had an affair with the person previously mentioned; the point is to go as far and as incongruously as possible. For example: this one is from Henry James to Ida Lupino. As follows: Henry James to Hugh Walpole to Harold Nicholson to the Hon. David Herbert to John C. Wilson to Noel Coward to Louis Hayward to Ida Lupino. Perhaps it all sounds rather dreary on paper: but I can assure you that, with a few drinks and some suitable folks to play with, you'll be amazed.*" At the end he added, "P.S. forgot to include my most favorite IDC: Cab Calloway to Hitler. Cab Calloway to Marquesa Casamaury to Carol Reed to Unity Mitford to Hitler. Please come play this game with me, you'd be wonderful at it. Also, it's a great way to insure you don't become a victim of my meandering mind. Kisses, your little Tru-love.

I laughed out loud at his audacity, and then read the note to Christian. We were enjoying a lovely morning in. I'd assembled lox and bagels, and then we cuddled on the sofa feeling very domestic and sweet.

"You must go to him," Christian insisted. "Truman, alone, with just Jack for company? It's too dangerous." Christian was no fan of Jack's. Horribly anti-social, Jack made a point of insulting at least one of our dinner guests each time he came over.

"Truman's liable to run off with a nobleman's goat or steal the town bell or something just for distraction. You must save him from himself," Christian insisted.

"Really? You won't be too lonesome without me?" I protested weakly. I was already itching to go. But I felt guilty, Christian and I were spending more and more time apart. He was so good about my going off to visit friends in Hollywood, Cuba and Florida that I guess I kind of got used to it. I assumed he did too. I didn't realize he just didn't want to chain me down.

"Let's just say I'm less likely to get into trouble without you than he is," he replied. Now there was an understatement. This time though it was me who was getting into trouble, and not the kind that Christian would have envisioned.

"What about Cecily?" I persisted for good measure.

Christian smirked at my attempt at maternal responsibility. "Since she started that school, we never see her until after four anyway. Kiko will look out for her. She's hardly

out of her room when she's home." This was true. At nine, Cecily was more of a mystery to me than she had been as an infant. Still, Christian's words let me off the hook. Didn't I tell you he was a doll-baby? I loved that man. Christian was working on his latest production and planned to be very busy, so I wrote to Truman that Christian could spare me for a few weeks and that I was already working on an IDC that began with Gloria Guinness and ended with Minnie Fosburgh - a gas pump jockey in Fresno was the inspired link.

Truman had painted an altogether untrue picture of his isolation. For one thing, he'd been called by his buddy David O. Selznick. David asked him to help out on John Huston's latest project starring David's wife Jennifer Jones. Huston and Bogart were already stationed in Rome trying to film the movie, a supposedly quirky mystery. They'd squared the cast, a stellar combination of Hollywood lights: besides Bogie and Jones, Peter Lorre and Robert Morley and they had the tasty, young Italian, Gina Lollobrigida. They picked a camera-ready location, the village of Ravello, topping the Amalfi coast south of Naples, and they'd scored the cash – actually, Bogie had put up most of it. The script however, was a stinker, and the movie was scheduled for a 1953 release. Selznick gave Truman a boffo build-up to Huston.

All that was left to do was convince Bogie. John called Truman and said 'here's our big chance. I don't have a very good script – well, practically no script at all' and Truman agreed to write it with him.

I'd been on movie sets many times through Wesley, but never had I been on one so wacky and fun. Even though they were on a very tight schedule – Truman did write one solid scene a day, no whipping necessary – he was never able to keep more than a day ahead of filming. He did much of his writing at night, testing out lines on Huston and myself. But only Huston got a co-author credit. Things went along swimmingly for a while. Truman never seemed to write very much per day, but then as Bogie pointed out, “We didn’t film very much either so it didn’t matter.”

For ten weeks, the set seemed like one glorious yacht party. I had written to Christian that my trip would be extended because Truman needed me at his side with this particularly tiresome endeavor. I asked Christian to call the nanny agency if keeping track of Cecily became too bothersome. I wrote that poor Tru was just doing it for the money, and was nearly emotionally spent. Unbeknownst to me, Tru kept up correspondence with Christian. I stumbled upon his papers after the divorce detailing our travails.

Dearest, (Truman wrote) the last few weeks have been filled with peculiar adventures, all involving John Huston and Humphrey Bogart. They’ve nearly killed us with their dissipations . . . half drunk all day and dead-drunk all night, and once, believe it or not, I came to around six in the morning to find King Farouk doing the hula-hula in the middle of Bogart’s bedroom. Sunny quickly tired of the whole thing. I must say I breathed a sigh when they went off to Naples.

I preferred to tell Christian my own stories, making less of the carousing and more of the work. I did have the sense not to rub in his face how much fun I was having

without him. Alas, Truman was always one step ahead of me. King Farouk was not the least of the celebrities who stopped by. My old friend, Bazaar editor, Carmel Snow, popped in for a weekend to partake of some shenanigans and had so much fun she stayed for a week. She gathered some terrific fashion shots for Bazaar while she was there. Appalled with how homely the women looked, she flew in some designs from her latest Parisian discovery, Hubert de Givenchy. She and I had great fun dressing the luscious Lollabridgida, whose hour-glass figure was decidedly unfashionably proportioned.

“My God, what shall we do with her tits?” the ladylike editor exclaimed. Bogart happened to be walking by at the time.

“Honey, you ain’t supposed to know. That’s a man’s job and let me tell you, them’s one hell of a job.” He chuckled.

In the end, we dressed Gina in the designs for the film, but Carmel photographed me in them for Bazaar. After mixing business with pleasure she kissed us all goodbye, and prepared to leave the Palumbo Hotel, where we camped.

“Why, honey, what’s wrong? Ain’t we chic enough for you?” Bogart called.

“My dear man, compared to yours, my life is lived in a salt mine,” she got into her car and unrolled the window. “No, it’s just that now I must straighten my face and stop having fun.”

“Well, remember, I like you, honey,” he said. “You’re a very ballsy-type type”

That stopped the pristine Mrs. Snow for a minute. Then deciding a compliment had been paid, she replied: "Am I? Well, so are you. Bye-bye tough boy."

"Bye-bye, tough gal." And off she went.

Things happened on that set that could only have happened on a John Huston set, in winter, in an Italian town, where there was no heat, no electricity, and nothing to eat or drink except what was shipped in," John Barry Ryan, Huston's assistant, said later. "Every night there was poker game with Huston, Selznick and Bogart. Jennifer Jones was being pursued by a tall Italian lesbian, who was in turn pursued by a short, dumpy Italian lesbian."

I couldn't have put it better myself except she wasn't dumpy. She was enchanting and there was only one woman she was pursuing - me. What John kindly neglected to mention, but Truman threatened to reveal, was my involvement with the dumpy Italian lesbian, Lita. In my eyes she was far from dumpy, short yes, but that added to her lushness. She had round, fat breasts, unencumbered by lingerie, and something about the atmosphere and the cool temperatures made me want to bite those breasts the moment I saw them. Her legs were thick but her bottom was firm and her mouth, well, it was extraordinary. Within my first days in Ravello Lita identified that among the things I'd forgot to bring, a lady's maid was the most urgent. Setting herself up in the position, she thought of nothing but my comfort for the duration of the ten weeks. Few things are as comforting as a woman's tongue, I soon learned. She and I shared a hotel room to keep costs down since Bogie was footing the bill. Without getting too tiresomely revealing, I

was finally able to understand why Garbo and Tallulah had abandoned the brotherhood altogether. I love men, always will, but there is an exquisite tenderness in a woman's touch that no man I've met, can muster, and breasts, wow. What colossal fun breasts are.

Truman only brought it up once or twice. I must admit I was a little concerned about who he would tell. I tried to play it down, like I didn't give a damn about who knew what, but that wasn't true. I was quite concerned. Lesbianism was a dark charge that would leave my female friends confused and uncomfortable in my company. They were sophisticated, but only when they were prepared. If Tru told them this, they'd feel blindsided, betrayed and awkward.

"Lesbianism – I didn't see that coming, Ms. Marcus – you do have a way of surprising."

I laughed. "If a lesbian sleeps with a man, we still consider her a lesbian, but if a straight girl sleeps with a girl we think of her as a lesbian. Why is that?"

Truman nodded vigorously. "Exactly!" I was preaching to the converted. "I do believe this little escapade of yours has deepened our bond, honey-chile." And, in a way it did. I would never be the perfect Babe or blue-blooded, but I was now, in his eyes anyway, an artful deviant. I loved that. It made me more exciting and worldly than any of them. In a strange way I had topped them.

Truman made me feel very sensual and treasured in Italy and without being my lover, he made me feel sexual. Naturally, I could not explore that with any of the men around who all knew Christian. So when Lita came by with an obliging tongue, it was exactly the right thing. We were so discreet. Few even knew of it, and fewer believed it. It wasn't as if Lita traveled in our circles. Frankly, even if Christian had found out, I think he would have been more titillated than hurt. But, it was one more thing Truman had on me.

"Would you be embarrassed if I told?" Truman's eyed me playfully. It was just a game, so I responded philosophically. Stupid, stupid me – little did I know how serious his question was.

"I would weather it of course. Fortunately, this type of disclosure is much more difficult for a man than a woman, as you well know. But people do view you differently, and you know that too. Should the time come to close ranks for any reason, the smallest difference is remembered."

Those words would haunt Truman later, when he was embroiled in vicious lawsuit with Gore Vidal in the seventies. Truman begged his 'best friend' Lee Radziwill to back him up, to admit that she'd been his source for the story Gore was denying. The story was common knowledge, Gore had been thrown out of the White House because he had been rude to Jackie. Big deal, not that juicy at all. Certainly, Truman shouldn't have shared it on television. But what the hell was the litigious Gore doing making lawyers rich by suing Truman. What does Lee do? She not only testifies on behalf of Gore,

pleading complete ignorance, but then, when questioned, she poo poos her betrayal by calling them ‘just a couple of fags’. . . and to a gossip columnist no less.

Chapter Twenty-one

Babe and I raced to the hospital. She held my hand in the cab, willing me to maintain my decorum. She was very calm and therefore calming. She gave the cabbie very specific instructions on the fastest way to Mount Sinai. He nodded and followed her directions to the comma.

“What did the doctor say exactly?” she asked me again. I had forgotten to answer her the first time, or maybe I had answered and she was just repeating herself. No other topic of conversation mattered.

I took a deep breath; my mouth didn’t want to work properly. My jaw felt foreign, stiffer, as if all the lines on my face pointed downward. “It was a nurse. She just said Christian had collapsed at The Lunt-Fontanne theatre. A stagehand called an ambulance, and he’d been brought there.”

“A stagehand?” She prodded, as if the details of the conversations were vital to rectifying the situation.

I nodded at her gratefully. Still, my hands shook in hers. The last time I shook like this was my wedding day. “He said Christian was on the phone discussing his play. He began rubbing his shoulder as if he had a muscle cramp, and then he grabbed his chest and fell down. He said Christian went very pale.” Babe nodded as if every word I uttered was priceless.

The cabbie pulled in front of the emergency room. I counted out the cash, careful to tip well. I needed the good will. I clenched my teeth to stop them from chattering.

Christian was a very healthy man. In his fifties, he still moved like a twenty-year old, springy and quick. His eyes were irrepressibly naughty. Babe grabbed my handbag which I had dropped when I took out my change purse. Arm in arm we walked to the front desk. The nurse looked up, her pale eyes registering our appearance, perhaps recognizing Babe - even in New York, where beauty and wealth abound we were impressive. Babe looked at me. I couldn't manage to get the corners of my mouth to turn up much less to open.

"We're here to see Mr. Christian Marcus. This is Mrs. Marcus. He was brought in by ambulance about 30 minutes ago," she informed the nurse.

"Yes. I will let Dr. Feniston know you're here," she indicated we should move to the waiting area. Her voice fell distantly against the flat green walls as she paged the doctor. It reminded me of hearing the ocean in a conch shell.

"Where is my husband?" I spoke finally, my voice husky.

"He's with the doctor," She looked at me curiously. She seemed young to be a nurse. I felt old. "He's sitting up, ma'am, and talking." My stomach lightened, I straightened my back.

"Point us in the correct direction please," I commanded. "We'll meet Dr Feniston half way." Babe squeezed my arm. The nurse pointed to the left corridor.

A fiftish white-coated man walked towards us. Noting the door he'd come from, I nodded to him and left Babe to greet him. as I walked in to the hospital room. I didn't want to deal with the details; I just wanted to see my husband. Christian sat up straight, pale, but mine. No tubes or machines. He just looked as if he'd been woken from a deep

sleep. A boy I recognized as a stagehand from the theatre perched on the sill in the corner.

“Hey there, Sunny,” Christian whispered. I started to cry. I rushed to hold him, kissed his temples where feathers of gray invaded his thick brush cut. His blue eyes looked tired. The crinkles at their edges prominent and white. He looked mortal.

I couldn’t say anything. I just kept kissing his face, stroking his hair and his arms. He started laughing weakly, “I’m okay, sweetie. It was just a scare.” The doctor and Babe and Bill Paley walked in. I looked at Bill confused.

“Babe called me.” He answered my puzzled look.

I looked over at Babe, who explained, “I was scared, if something happened, or you needed to make decisions, I just thought...” Her voice trailed off. She now addressed Bill, “I guess I just figured you’d know what to do.” I nodded, I knew what she meant. Babe touched Bill’s shoulder. Bad things couldn’t possibly happen in the Paleys’ collective presence; they glowed too brightly. Wealth, power, position, brains and beauty combined with the essential component of uncompromising focus could banish anything - bad health and incompetent doctors included. I hugged Christian again.

The doctor interrupted. “Well, now that the gang’s all here,” he began, trying without effect to regain power in his own hospital. “As Mr. Marcus just said, it was a scare. A minor heart attack luckily, and while he’s fine,” I quickly looked up, “he’s not as good as new.” He paused, a physician’s instinct for timing. We were a theatre crowd; we liked our drama on a stage.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked, my body tensing.

Christian patted my arm.

“It means slowing down a bit. Cutting back on hours at the office, relaxing more.”

I unsnapped my pocketbook looking for my cigarettes. It didn't occur to me that Christian wasn't relaxed. We were always having fun, forever entertaining or being entertained. He hardly spent any time in his office; I regularly teased him that it was simply a place for his secretary to schedule his lunch plans.

“You need to come to Kiluna,” Bill insisted referring to the Paley's waterfront house where we'd been married. “Both of you. It's the best place in the world to relax.” Christian nodded non-committally. I seized the opportunity, figuring Christian just didn't want to impose.

“Yes,” I agreed immediately. “And we'll look for a place of our own. Perhaps close to Kiluna,” I turned to Christian. “We'll get you out of the city. Manhasset will be the perfect place to recoup. Leave it all to me.”

He laughed warmly, and held my hand tight. Bill and the doctor talked further. Then he and Babe and the young stagehand left. I turned to Christian, “The troops have filed out, sir. Tell me really. Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Now that you're here. That young man was great. He reacted very quickly.”

“Did someone say something to upset you? Who were you talking to? Why did it occur then?”

“No, I was talking about a new play with a British investor. She is new to investing in the theatre and had some questions for me about who to talk to. We were just

talking about off-Broadway when I felt this strange tingling in my shoulder. It was sort of like an ache - remember growing pains?"

I nodded.

"Then I felt this terrible searing in my chest and boom, I went down." He touched my hair. "Look at your serious little face. I'm fine, I got to ride in an ambulance which was a first."

"It better be the last too," I warned. "Forty-four is too young to be widowed. I need at least another thirteen years of marriage from you."

"Lucky thirteen," he smiled. It was hard to believe we'd been together that long. Time was easy with Christian. No bumps or stumbles along the way, just laughter and some goofiness. Even Cecily didn't provide any stress now that she was fourteen. Sure she was a little surly, but no more than any other hormonal girl would be at her age. Who paid attention anyway?

I enlisted Truman and Babe to help me find a place while Christian recuperated at Kiluna. We poked around hobby farms and dilapidated, graceless mansions. I wanted something we could restore, transform into our dream escape. I had visions of clean white porches, a hammock or two and a wild, overgrown path leading to the water. I'd return each afternoon to bring Christian books and newspapers and goofy presents I'd found in the local junk shop. Truman was a great junk collector and he often lured me out with promises of treasure buried beneath bicycle rims and wobbly dressers. Christian didn't seem to mind our excursions. He rested most of the morning, enjoying the peace and quiet. Truman, however, was a little possessive.

“Mama-Trauma, really,” Truman said. He dangled his legs from Babe’s porch swing. Christian was sleeping in the sunroom, cozy with blankets to keep the fall chill at bay. “It’s time to get out now. We’ve been cooped up here too long. Let’s head back to the city for a bit of fun.” He lifted his nose in the air pretending to catch the scent of something. “I smell Henri’s soufflé calling to me.”

“I can’t leave Christian here, he’s just had a heart attack, for goodness sake.”

“Babe’s got the trauma department all set up; she’ll make sure he’s taken care of. Come with me please, we’ll have lots of fun.” He pressed his chin down to his chest and pushed out his bottom lip. “Please, I’m very, very bored, aren’t you?”

“Truman, he’s my husband.”

“Yeah, well, I’m your playmate, and let me tell you right now, you’re no fun at all. What are you going to do? Watch him heal?” Truman hopped down from the swing and gestured to Christian, still sleeping inside.

“Well yes, as a matter of fact that was exactly what I planned to do. I think you’re being very selfish.” I pushed off on the deck and began swinging.

“Well, I think you’re not a very good friend. Christian has everything he could possibly need right now, but I need to get back to the city. I have to work. I can’t stay here and play all the time with you. I have to get back at it. I thought you understood that.” He was practically stomping his little feet.

“Oh Truman, I do, of course, I know you need to work.”

“You think I’m just here to be your court jester,” He was in a full-fledged pout, now. This was where we always came to. I didn’t take him and his work seriously. I just viewed him as my consort. I patted him on the shoulder. He looked so despondent.

“What are you writing now?” I asked, hoping to distract him. Truman loved to talk about his work. Some writers are afraid to discuss a project in progress, but not Truman. He would discuss in detail every paragraph he crafted or thought of crafting. He didn’t become superstitious about this until his talent had all but run dry.

He looked at me, considering, “Answered Prayers,” he said simply.

“Still?” I questioned – a bit ratty of me I know, but he’d been talking about it on and off for quite a while. This was just before the newspaper article on the murdered Clutter family appeared on Truman’s radar screen. His life would change irreparably from that moment on. For now it was still early in ’61 and he was just dreaming of his Proustian novel. Answered Prayers was his default book for years. When he wasn’t working on anything real, he tried to work at it.

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes, still. I’m still forming it. But I think I may have figured out the climax. That’s why I need to get back and immerse myself in New York. I feel too distant from it here. Plus,” he added conspiratorially, “I am feeling too bad about Babe. I don’t think I can stand to be around Bill tonight when he arrives.” Bill was coming up for the weekend.

I leaned in and asked, “Why ever not?”

“He’s been such a beast to her lately,” he replied. “I simply can’t stand it anymore.”

“Well, he’s no prince, but he loves her.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, rocking back and forth on his heels.

I looked around to make sure we were not being overheard. “Well yes. His little affairs mean nothing, Truman. Why would he be with her otherwise?”

“He married her because she’s so chic. Bill has the best taste of any man I’ve ever met, and I think he realized that Babe was ‘it’ as far as women were concerned. It wasn’t because of love, and I don’t think it was because of her social position - though that certainly helped. To him she is the ideal woman, perfect in every way. But what he wants is a Marilyn Monroe, a sexy broad. I try to tell Babe that he loves her, but she never believes me. She thinks that love and sex had to go together.”

But Bill didn’t. In fact at the very moment we were having this conversation, Bill and Babe were in their master suite. Funny, I didn’t even realize he was home. But there he was in tighty whities and black socks. When he and I made love it was always in the dark. Seeing him in the stark judgment of the afternoon sun I can see that our way was best. Babe had lured him upstairs for a little afternoon delight. My God she looks fabulous in a negligee. Not an ounce of fat on that woman – that was the beauty of cigarettes. We all stayed so thin because of cigarettes. This is very unHell-like right now. How fun, you must be enjoying this as much as I. How could anyone not? We peeping without any chance of discovery. Oh, listen.

“Darling, maybe later,” Bill reached for his trousers. “I’ve brought some papers that I need to go over before tomorrow.” He smiled tightly at her.

She walked over to him and put her arms around his neck, “Do them tonight.”

“We have guests, I can’t exactly ignore our guests at dinner now can I?” He held onto her arms lightly. She sighed.

“You don’t seem to have any problem ignoring me,” she pulled her arms down.

“Barbara, don’t be like that. I just have a lot to do.”

She tried again, “I just get so lonesome for you, darling.” She leaned on his shoulder. He patted her head, then kissed her on the ear.

“I get lonesome for you too, darling. Tonight let’s sneak away early, leave our guests to their own devices and be together.” She just nodded into his shoulder.

Hah, lonesome for her. That hound dog was never lonesome, though I never thought he would turn down sex. It’s not like he was particular. He fucked Marie Harriman for Christ’s sake and she was as big as a hippo with a face to match. Maybe that was the secret to his success, never be satisfied with what you’ve got, even if what you’ve got is as close to perfect as God allows. He never turned down sex with me. Oh shit, wait, I want to see more. Dammit. Is it because I was feeling self-satisfied? Is that why? Stop taking them away! Stop it. Shit. There’s nothing now. Ahh, damn, I can’t even believe in you.

No, I don’t know how long it’s been. It’s like I’ve got the worse hang over imaginable and I’m stuck under six layers of gauze wearing glasses too strong for me.

We're back with Tru. He's trying to convince me to leave my sick husband. Fuck. And me, the idiot, I'm going along. Where was my concern, my worry? My husband had just been through a major health scare – was I really that frivolous?

“We should get packing if we're going to make it back in time for dinner,” he eyed me slyly. “This isn't really the place to be having a discussion about the Paley's romantic life”

“Alright,” I conceded, “but only for tonight. I'll tell Christian I want to get something from the apartment.”

The inside gossip I garnered that night when we got back to Manhattan about the Paleys' failed love life was hot stuff. But nothing like what we just witnessed. According to Truman, Bill no longer went to Babe for sex and she was desperately unhappy about it. She even talked to Truman about leaving him. Truman claimed he saved her two times from taking her own life. When she got really serious about leaving him, Truman told her not to.

“Why would you stop her if she is so unhappy?” Babe and I were the best of friends, but not actually intimate. I was amazed that she confided in anyone to that extent. She was such a private person. “Perhaps it would be better for her if she were to just go?”

“She doesn't have any money of her own - not real money - and she's got four children. I told her to think of them. I said, ‘Bill bought you. It's as if he went down to Central Casting. You're a perfect type for him. Look upon being Mrs. William S. Paley as a job, the best job in the world. Accept it, and be happy with it.’

Truman was exactly right, totally pragmatic and exactly right. And I guess that's what she did because she stayed married to him to the bitter end. And yes the end was bitter.

I listened and said nothing. I felt soiled, like I'd been listening at key holes. I regretted coming home with Truman. Plus, I had nothing I wanted to offer. At this point in the conversation, one usually repaid Truman with gossip of one's own. But tonight was different. He hadn't confided his own private troubles and vulnerabilities. He'd shared Babe's. And I knew Babe and how much she would hate her bed sheets unfurled over the tables at *La Côte Basque*. I felt ashamed of both of us. I should have paid attention to the feeling.

When Christian and I returned to Manhattan a month later, Truman's new book *Breakfast at Tiffany's* had been released. We discovered a new parlor game in practice in many Upper East Side Salons: "Who is Truman's heroine Holly Golightly?"

There were many willing to nominate themselves as the inspiration for the book's heroine. Truman claimed her portrait was culled from many of the women he knew in his youth, yet scatterbrained glamorpusses like Carol Marcus, Oona Chaplin and Gloria Vanderbilt still claimed to be the sole model. On closer reading, one could tell that no model was required only a writer's muse. Holly was just a female Truman, a slender, better-dressed Truman jam-packed with all his insecurities. Babe and I looked on amused, as the debs and post-debs vied for the honor. It was probably the first time I started feeling my age. No longer girlish, I was a society matron, which we all know is just a 'ly' away from dowdy, something I was terrified of.

After about six months of rest, Christian mended beautifully. We led a subdued life for about four more months, and then Christian was ready to embark on a new play. I was so relieved to see him back to being his old, vital self. I suggested he put off the play, and instead come to Europe with me to meet Truman – we’d just received another of his long, lonesome letters begging our company, this time in Venice. And now that Christian was in the pink again, I couldn’t resist a place I’d never been. But Christian longed to be back at Broadway as much as I longed to be on the move, so he kindly agreed to do without me for a short time while I joined Truman for a few weeks.

Truman’s idea of Venice was Harry’s Bar. He did not sightsee. He’d had his fill of canal rides and Harry’s was his home away from home. That was his way of traveling – locating a bar or bistro he could return to. Indeed, he and Jack became such fixtures at Harry’s; they received notes from the proprietor when too much time had passed between visits. I loved Harry’s Bar too, but found returning each night to the same place a bore. One night, I persuaded him to forage beyond Harry’s and try an outdoor café near St. Mark’s Square.

“Contessa, do you bother with the new restaurants sprouting all over Greenwich Village?” He argued with me while we walked to the café.

“No Truman, of course not,” he raised his brows triumphantly, but I continued. “But New York is my home, so technically I could visit them at any time. I don’t live here. I’d like to experience more than just the inside of one bar.”

“Fine,” he pouted, “ But it won’t be any fun.”

We arrived at the restaurant and chose a little metal table in front so we could watch the comings and goings in the square. The rickety chairs scraped the stone paving as we sat down. Truman winced at the unpleasant sound.

“Careful you don’t catch your trousers on the chair, Contessa, these sharp edges can be unmerciful.” He looked disdainfully at my seat.

I nodded, frowning. A waiter came to take our drink order. Truman ordered his usual martini and I held up two fingers, indicating I’d like one too. Truman was now dramatically squinting at the setting sun. He patted down his shirt pocket and his pants pockets, searching his bag with evident frustration.

“What is it now, Truman?” I asked, exasperated.

“My sunglasses – do you have my sunglasses? Maybe we should switch seats; the sun is just beating down on me.”

I rolled my eyes, “Would you prefer to sit inside? I wouldn’t want you to suffer from a sun stroke or anything.” The sky, tinged pink by the coming night, barely warranted a blink, much less darkened lenses.

Mercifully the waiter returned with our martinis, setting them with a rattle atop our table. The waiter had barely removed his fingers before I clasped it in my hand for a hearty gulp. Truman followed suit. Then he roared with sheer joy. “Hah!”

I made a face at the taste before I could stop myself.

“Go on,” he goaded me, “ask the bartender what goes into a martini?”

Knowing I would never have a moment’s peace until his victory was complete, I called over the waiter.

His answer, which was in broken English, so we may have misunderstood him, was this: one third gin, one third vermouth, one third cognac, and a twist of lemon peel.

Truman paid the check and high-tailed it back to Harry's before I had a chance to pop his smug little face.

Whenever we traveled together, Truman received regular *communiqués* from Manhattan, keeping tabs on all the fun and frolic we were missing. He had worked out quite a system for living abroad: work in the mornings; pause for lunch; write letters after lunch to all the good letter writers in his network then play in the afternoon. This trip seemed more letter heavy than our previous ones. His stack of letters daily were quite astounding. He had to be receiving five or six a day. I chalked it up to his new found popularity courtesy of *Breakfast at Tiffanys*. Apparently one of the movie studios wanted to option it for a future production. I should have known something was up. I've always been so self-absorbed. I guess I didn't really stop to wonder. I did notice he didn't read them out to me as often as he had done in the past. I really missed that. The only letters I wrote with any regularity were to Christian. Truman usually updated me about the rest of the crowd. I almost always preferred hearing it filtered through him anyway. He so relished the telling. But this time the telling was very minimal. Again, I chalked it up to his work pre-occupying him. I did ask him once to read me a letter that had him quite engrossed.

"Oh contessa, it's dull, dull, dull."

"So bore me," I implored.

"It's just Babe again. You know the usual, Bill's a bastard, blah, blah, blah."

I laughed. “Well, when you put it like that it does seem rather dull.”

“Told you,” and then he changed the subject.

How could I have not known then? Truman passing up a chance to gossip? I was so narcissistic I couldn’t see the ass for the trousers, and in this case the ass was me.

Christian’s play was in pre-production, and rehearsals were going well. I read his letters in St. Mark’s square in the morning, without Truman’s prying eyes. I adored those mornings to myself. The slow rumble of the square coming alive resembled the sounds of an approaching thunderstorm with the pigeons and sharp metal tables providing the soundtrack.

I’d wake around 7:30 to greet the pigeons and Marcel, my waiter, by 8:30. I suppose I wasn’t that different from Truman; I had my regular places too. Marcel’s café was my breakfast spot. I grabbed my writing paper and books - always books, even before Truman, and headed out to be part of the day. This morning I looked forward to reading two letters from home amid my pigeons. Marcel was still scratching tables across the paving in front of the café. The sky reminded me of creamery butter. I sat down outside and wrapped my scarf more firmly around my neck and looked forward to my thick coffee.

“Marcel, darling, may I have my pastry warmed this morning, and my toes and fingers too? When did autumn arrive?” I teased, as he sat my coffee and The London Times before me.

“Just this morning, Mrs. Marcus, terrible manners, it didn’t call ahead to reserve a table. Simply invaded.” See why I loved Marcel? Irreverent and charming – just like me. There aren’t enough like us unfortunately.

“Send it home, Marcel, it doesn’t belong here.”

“Home, madam? Where is autumn’s home?”

“Manhattan, of course. Fall and Manhattan are more intimate than sepia tones and silver frames.”

“Very prettily said,” he laughed.

“Thank you, Truman’s influence,” I replied and nodded. Truman frequented Marcel’s too. “The Upper West Side turns golden brown and positively bristles with purpose. All the lovely school children tidied and restrained by oxfords, pleats and penny loafers.” I took a sip from the broad-brimmed coffee cup, “I must be homesick, Marcel, I’m almost poetical.”

“Mr. Truman’s influence,” he rejoined.

“It’s pervasive or perverted. I’m not sure which.” I laughed and unfolded the paper.

Marcel walked away. I really was homesick. It was time. I wanted my own bed and my own husband. I would tell Truman this morning. I scanned the headlines. The Kennedy administration troubles were deepening in the South. Southern democrats were protesting loudly about why they had not aligned with the party of Lincoln. I turned the page. The South didn’t interest me in the least, overly polite, peevish people whose exaggerated manners served only to condescend. The British Prime Minister Macmillan

did not seem long for his role. Oh who cares - a boring lot, this crop of ruler - not a Roosevelt or Churchill among them.

I pulled my letters from my purse.

The first was from Christian. Tearing the side of the envelope, I blew into it and dropped my letter on the table.

Darling Sunny,

We are only a month away from opening night and the publicity machine is chugging along before we've even opened. The Post is most enthusiastic, too enthusiastic – makes me wonder who's banging the critic. Those things rarely work in my favor. The affair is usually dead by opening night and the reviews become scathing. Oh well, how dull it would be if we all kept our undies on – might as well be accountants.

Things have been very busy, but don't worry I am not overdoing it. How is Truman? Are you tired of Harry's yet? Do you intend to return home from Venice or are you making another stop along the way? I would like you to be home for the opening. The crew is really boffo, a great group of kids.

I had to get rid of Nanny Christine. She was just ghastly, kept Cee Cee up till all hours, no regular schedule, at least not from what I could see from my very irregular vantage point. The final straw was the liquor cabinet. I came home late last Saturday night, poured myself bourbon, only to discover it had been watered down – and not out of concern for my health. Naturally I let her go immediately. I could have forgiven her the erratic hours had she not had the appalling judgment to ruin well-aged bourbon and behave with such a lack of imagination.

A nanny tipling, how trite, poor Christian.

Anyway I don't think Cee is traumatized or anything, I've brought her to work with me a couple of times and she seems to love it. The crew makes a big deal of her and really she is good as gold, a little timid, but all in all, she does you proud.

Did he take her out of school I wondered? Honestly, when it came to parenting Christian didn't seem to have a clue.

Anyway darling, we are both ready for you to come home. You've had a nice long trip of it, but the leaves have changed color, and unless you hurry home soon you'll miss them entirely. The dinner parties are in full swing and I'm in the horrid position of being an 'extra' man. Write and tell me when you'll be back. I love you, I miss you, xoxoxoxo
Christian

I smelled the letter; it retained the faint citrus-musk of his cologne. Yes he felt it too. It was time. Yet, his urgings had the opposite affect of their intentions. Truman had promised me a quick tour of Marrakech on this trip and after all New York sounded like it was humming along just fine. We would be able to go and still be back in time for Christian's opening at the end of November. New York will still be there when I got back, but when would I ever be able to go to Marrakech again? I'd discuss it with Truman when he emerged for lunch.

I grabbed the second letter with a pleasant sense of expectation. It was from Babe, the excellent blue paper and fine penmanship being as indicative of the sender as the return address.

Good morning Sunny, (She knew I read my letters in the morning regardless of when I received them. Details were one of her many talents)

Is it glorious there? Has Harry redecorated yet or has Truman forbidden him? It is lovely and noisy here. I was so damn sick of the sun by September. I practically raced the entire way from Kiluna to Connecticut barefoot. Every square inch of the beach was filled this year with more flesh than even I thought possible, and you know how I can squeeze people around a dining table. The traffic is quite unbearable. You'll never guess who's coming to town - really you have to come home soon darling, or you'll miss all the fun – come on try to guess. I'll give you a hint; Marella and Betsy just loathe her, and England's glad to see the rather prominent back end of her.

Pamela Churchill, I said aloud. The old gentleman seated at the table next to me looked over; I laughed and nodded to my letter.

Yes, you guessed, the old redheaded tart. I was amazed at Babe's cattiness, not normally her style. Naturally Betsy's in a tizz, because Pammy is an old 'friend' of Jock's and Jock expects Betsy to entertain her as she would any visiting pal. Marella, of course does not want to attend any gathering that Pam will be at and has postponed her New York shopping trip indefinitely, just on the off chance Gianni should decide to join her and renew flames from old embers.

The truly gruesome part is that Betsy, the cunning old hag, (whew, Babe had obviously misplaced her yellow dolls) has devised a plan that has she and Jock lodged safely in London. Something to do with their art collection – surveying it, transporting it – God knows what, she is such a terrible bore about the whole thing – important

reception held on Downing Street, mustn't offend . . . Perfectly brilliant of her, except guess who she's elected to be her host in absentia? Enough ridiculous guessing – me. She has shoved the aging harlot on me!

Now I need to ask you a great big, huge, favor darling. You know she's not the type of woman that can just fly solo. I need an extra man to help me out by being Pamela's escort. The Harrimans have graciously agreed to hold a dinner party in her honor, Marie has a wicked sense of humor. I think she just wants to lord it over Our Pammy that even faced with her artful devices, Averill returned home gift-laden and repentant to Marie. Anyway, could I please borrow Christian? It would only be for a week, he could take her to a show and dinner to give me some relief. He's really the only safe man I can think of who would be immune to her sagging charms. He is so devoted to you, please write and tell me it would be okay. She'll be here in a few weeks.

Yours, Babe

I chuckled to myself - poor Babe, what a situation. The subtext of the letter of course was, Babe wanted her around as little as possible, lest Bill get it in his head (whichever one he was thinking with at the time) that Pammy, while long in the tooth, may be an interesting diversion. He was such a hound dog. I immediately wrote that Christian would be delighted to help her out. I then wrote Christian and outlined the story, knowing how amused he would be, and told him he had my full permission to escort the most celebrated slut of our generation anywhere he liked. I also promised to be home in time to attend his opening night.

Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Even in a haze this thick I can see what an idiot I was.

Chapter Twenty-Two

We were stuck at a hotel in Tangier called the *El Farhar*. Truman had stayed there ten years ago. “Rhymes with horror,” our companion Tennessee Williams quipped. Ghastly place! Tru was planning to escape without me and I was really feeling antsy. “Dammit Truman, Christian’s going to kill me, and rightly so.”

“Of course he won’t. Plus I really have to get back to Manhattan. It’s only one opening night. He’s a producer for God’s sake, you’ll have hundreds of them.”

“Yes, but he explicitly asked me to be home in time for it. And I’ve barely had any contact with him since we got here. I’m feeling very disconnected.”

“I’ll explain to him when I get there. Hell, I’ll escort him to his opening night. The ban is supposed to be lifted in two weeks.”

“Christian’s opening night is in five days. Tell me again why a cholera epidemic allows you to escape now, and why I need to stay in this God-forsaken hell-hole for a full two weeks longer?” I was pacing in his hotel room as he packed.

“Nobody is allowed to travel till November 30th.”

“Which means I won’t be home till the beginning of December! Why do you get to go now?” This was ridiculous.

“Sweetheart I’ve only managed to scare up one passage out of here and I’m risking my life to take it. It’s illegal and bad and the accommodations are horrendous. Nonetheless, I have to have it; my publisher is screaming for these pages and threatening to take back my advance. My bank account’s threadbare. I’d have to start turning tricks if

they took away my mostly spent advance. You'll be perfectly comfortable here at the hotel."

"Why can't they get two seats? I will pay anything, did you tell them that?"

"Of course I told them, Paul told them, Jane told them. They don't seem impressed with the information."

"Tell them I have a sick daughter at home that needs a mother's attention."

Truman rolled his eyes. "Oh Sunny really,"

Still I persisted. "Give me your seat and I'll bring the pages to your publisher and cover your advance if need be." I was desperate. Something wasn't right. I could just feel it. I hadn't heard from Christian in quite a while. Yet Truman was still getting his mail. Truman assured me he must just be busy with the production now that he was down to the wire. Still it wasn't like Christian. I worried that I'd actually ticked him off. After all I had promised to be home two earlier times and hadn't managed to make it. "What about a yacht? There must be somebody we know that can come and pick me up. The Agnellis, they're not supposed to be in New York right now."

"They're off to Palm Beach with the Guinness's."

"I can't believe this. You are just going to leave me here all alone."

"Sweetheart, you are not exactly all alone. The Bowles are here, and Tennessee and you're having a wonderful time. You said so only two days ago."

"Yes, that was before I knew I couldn't leave when I wanted to," I muttered. The Bowles were indeed a fascination, if quite insane. Paul wrote and composed. Jane was both a writer and playwright who wrote surrealistic, impossible-to-follow fiction praised

by the pretentious and talented alike. Tennessee considered himself her biggest fan and patron. Even Tru, who has a bad word to say about everybody, thought her one of the best *female* writers of the 20th century – notice the backhandedness of the compliment, that's Tru- the prick.

And that was that. Truman headed out, smuggled on the boat bound for Algeciras. Gibraltar's ports were closed to Morocco until the epidemic passed, which ended up being a week longer than I'd been told. It was a painfully boring time. The weather was all wrong, the people were strange. All that I'd found charming and exotic now seemed unsophisticated and inconvenient. What a horrible place. The Bowles offered some companionship, but I think they were ready for me to go too. That was the only time I know of that I overstayed my welcome. It was probably one of the more depressing times in my life. When I finally set sail December 6th, it was a full week after Christian's opening night. Which, as luck would have it he had managed to find a date for it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Truman walked straight over to me, funereal in his dinner jacket. He always wore beautifully-tailored clothes, though rarely well and tonight was no exception. Somewhere between his tailor and his destination, his newly fitted finery stretched, giving him the aura of a rummage-sale aficionado.

He whispered, "Leave your gloves on Countess."

Lights were low in Pamela's foyer, her burgundy voile wallpaper barely discernable amid the candles. Confused, I did as I was told.

"Boudoir lighting?" I joked. "Much more forgiving to old broads like us."

I had no sense of foreboding, no feeling of doom. I handed my cloak and umbrella to Charles, Pamela's butler.

Austere white orchids filled the entrance. Orchids, my flower – or at least the flower my husband, Christian always purchased for me. When courting he flew orchids in from international growers daily. It was December, 1962 in Manhattan; these too, would have been flown in, I thought absently.

The scene beyond the foyer captured my attention – an intimate round table set for two. A lover's table - a warm juxtaposition to the orchids. But Pamela had invited Christian and me for dinner, and obviously Tru was staying. Pamela was too much of a perfectionist to have miscounted. Still, it did not dawn on me. Truman looked at me expectantly.

“Charles, bring Mrs. Marcus back her cloak at once,” he called, then gripped my arm. Confused, I removed my gloves and moved away from Truman. I saw Christian lurking by the table.

“Tru-love darling, what are you doing? Christian, sweetheart,” I called, “Where *is* Pamela?”

“She’s just finishing dressing dear. I was hoping for a few moments alone with you,” he looked pointedly at Truman.

I walked over to Christian, smiling. “Darling, that’s what our bedroom’s for, or even our kitchen table really when I’m not feeling particular, but not dinner parties.” I had missed him. As far as husbands go, he was a doll baby. Not a dreary demanding bone in his perfectly tailored and tended body. I placed my hand on his arm and leaned to give him a kiss. He turned his head slightly. He smelled different. That was the warning. I don’t mean he smelled of *her*, nothing that banal, he simply smelled different. Now that I think about it - it was a hotel smell. An impersonal mixture of unfamiliar soaps and launderers.

Christian removed my hand from his arm and led me over to sofa to the right of the table. It was one of those cozy, overstuffed affairs that swallow you whole. Not my preference. I like my sofa’s firm like my men. Not wanting to rumple further – I’d just been on a plane for what seemed like a week - I sat on the arm and motioned for Truman to join us. He just stood awkwardly in the foyer – like a diffident prom date. Wispy, blond hair flopped above his bright eyes. He snatched my cloak from Charles, clenching

it in his fists. I was about to suggest he hand the damn thing back to Charles before he ruined it, when our hostess deigned to be cordial.

“Chris darling, do make Sunny a drink, don’t just leave her hanging, she must be parched after her trip to deepest, darkest Africa.” Pamela called from the next room using her plummiest tone, which makes even the most benign sentence patronizing. Schooling in Britain’s dullest public academies has its pluses.

Christian moved around the bar with an ease that finally tipped me off.

“Dear God Christian, you can’t be serious.”

He looked at me briefly, his ears pinked. He held out a highball stiffly, doing his best Cary Grant and failing miserably. “I’m afraid so, Sunny. I’m truly sorry, it seemed . . .”

I stood and snatched the highball from his hands. My eyes felt hard and dry as I looked into his. “Oh for Christ sakes, Christian, fuck her, don’t marry her. Nobody marries Pamela Churchill. Nobody has to.”

“Now Sunny really,” Christian indicated with a nod that Pamela was in the next room. I laughed at his delicacy.

“I know exactly where that British slut is darling, in the bedroom as usual. Everyone knows *where* she is. The only newsworthy thing is who she’s with, or rather how much he’s funneling into her retirement fund! My God, Christian, even Agnelli, who hasn’t had a thought above his waist since puberty, didn’t *marry* her, and he could better afford to. Hell, I think she’s still on his payroll for old time’s sake.”

I heard a crash in the other room. Christian looked in the direction of the bedroom, and then looked over at me, pained. He would just have to work this out, I thought. He's not going to be idiot enough to end fourteen years of marriage for a fling with that dumpy redhead. I decided discretion is the better part of valor. I would simply retreat, and let him sort things out. Lord knows in the course of our marriage, I had hardly been a saint myself. Even the best unions endure some kind of turmoil and Christian had been such a dream. I decided against the momentary relief of verbal castration. Instead, I patted his arm.

"We will talk about this later, at home. Do what you need to do to make this better, sweetheart." I kissed his unresponsive lips and walked to Truman, still waiting in the entrance.

Easing the door shut, Tru pressed the button for Pamela's private elevator. These digs she rented weren't cheap; I wondered how much our bank account was contributing. Pamela Churchill was extremely well-connected. Even before she married Winston's son Randolph, her life as Pamela Digby was rife with Britain's dusty peerage, but for all her social credibility she wasn't flush. Her family had land and lineage, but not much else. Anything farthings she had to spare, she earned herself, the old fashioned way, on her back.

Her building on Fifth at East 102d Street was built in the '20s. Always on the edge, our Pammy. Any farther north on Fifth and you enter oblivion, at least as far as visitors go. If you are in the business of husband thievery this may or may not be the intention. Even so East 102d wasn't exactly no man's land; in fact the building she lived

in, stayed in, whatever – rented by my generous husband I later discovered – was number 1215, a damn good address.

When we got out onto Fifth, Truman hailed a cab. I hate cold, snow less nights in December. February without flurries is fine. I'm bored with winter's accessories by then, but December without snow is a broken promise.

"Are you all right, Contessa?" he questioned after he helped me into the backseat.

I nodded. I guess I was. I loved Christian, but he wasn't the first to fall for the slatternly Mrs. Churchill's charms. She was a marvel; she had the ability to slip into a man's life and slowly inflate like a big, cozy pillow, cushioning all aspects of their existence so the pain of living became simply a rumor. And I am not an attentive wife. Loving yes, lively I hope, but often absent.

When we arrived at the restaurant, Henri Soulé, the owner, did not seat us himself, for once. He was already over at *El Morocco*. It was half past ten. Truman and I usually decorated *La Côte Basque*'s banquettes during the day. This is why we were here now. The dinner crowd was strictly tourist. Tru and I were hiding out. It would only be a matter of hours before our world knew of my marriage difficulties. We had to figure out my attitude. My social status was actually in some jeopardy. If this affair went on too long, it could get rather embarrassing. Pamela Harriman was no two-bit chorine. She had status all her own. It didn't seem that she and Christian had been too discreet either. I was put out by this. It was a rule, written down in some men's club, no doubt, that if you are going to dabble in your own social set, you keep it very hush, hush and make sure whose you dabble with are married too. For example, Bill Paley and I – I'm fairly sure some

Manhattan hostesses knew he and I, well, enjoyed each other, but it didn't make it difficult for them. They could invite the both of us to their dinner parties with our spouses, and pretend that everything was kosher. This situation was stickier. Pammy had no spouse - which could mean she was out for a ring, rather than a romp.

No doubt Pammy would parade Christian at the El Mo or the Stork Club shortly to create a buzz. That's, at least, what I would do, if I were going for the gold, so to speak. I said as much to Truman.

Gilbert, our favorite server, placed the restaurant's renowned martinis in front of us seconds after we were seated at the table.

"Hmm," I murmured, after a deep sip, "God, Gilbert what do you do to these?"

Gilbert is one of a dwindling group of elite gentlemen servers who pride themselves on the perfect execution of table service. Like Wodehouse's Jeeves, this group is paternalistic, without presumption. Waitering is not a stop-gap to a higher calling for these men; it is the calling - the latter-day remnants of the Victorian servant class. I'm certainly not one to criticize my own gender, but a woman can't serve like a man - perhaps we are all too used to being served by women. No novelty in it. To be served by a dignified man, now that's a treat. For men too, I think. Men feel gratified by a show of respect from another man. Only disrespect from women catches their attention. At least that was my philosophy, till earlier this evening.

"I know all Gilbert's martini secrets," Truman proclaimed smugly. "Gilbert taught me years ago when I worked here."

“Truman, you didn’t!” I burst out in disbelief. Gilbert commanded my full attention now. “Gilbert, you didn’t actually hire him?”

Tru gave me a look of mock hurt and said, “As a matter of fact, Henri did hire me, for about three seconds, then made Gilbert, the beast, show me the door.”

I hooted with laughter, my least attractive trait, my hoot, a cross between a cowboy whoop and a machine gun, I’ve been told - though I suspect it was a way for Hemingway to work machine gun fire into our conversation. “Oh Gilbert, poor you, was Tru absolutely ghastly? I just can’t imagine.” Tru was now convulsed in laughter at some memory. I cracked my cigarette case and gestured to Truman, “Well, you just don’t have the temperament or the balance, darling. Gilbert how many times did Mr. Capote crash the dessert cart?”

“Monsieur Capote was perfectly competent with the dessert cart,” Gilbert’s eyes widened slightly. He leaned toward the table and said with a stage whisper, “There was, however, some business about the soufflés.”

“Oh, no Tru, not Henri’s Golden Soufflé,” I put my hand to my mouth. Despite my irritation at my husband’s current entanglement, I couldn’t help but giggle. I could just picture Henri’s horror at the jarring of his famous time-consuming Golden Soufflé.

“I do believe, Madame, that Monsieur Soulé’s exact words were ‘Unholy catastrophé.’”

Gilbert bowed and said “I will give Madame and Monsieur a few moments to acclimatize.”

Gilbert was referring to our odd choice of table. Truman would later famously describe *Côte Basque*'s hierarchy of seating. That night we avoided the front and center positioning that was our due by virtue of Tru's fame and my socialite status. Instead, we opted for Siberia where nobody, but nobody, ever sat unless there was larceny afoot.

"I'm amazed Henri ever let you darken his doorstep again,"

"I dazzled him with my fame - he was a pushover, one article in *Life* and the red carpets unfurls everywhere. Anyway, it was a small price to pay to learn the secret to Gilbert's martinis. Check your olives," Truman ordered fingering the stem of his glass.

I made a great show of delicately working the olive off the stick with my teeth.

"Now bite, darling,"

"I was told never to bite, nibble perhaps, but bite? *Quelle horreur!*"

Tru snorted wickedly.

I obliged "Hey, that's not an olive!" My hand shot to cover my lips in surprise.

"It's a pickled green tomato. Gilbert may be French, Countess, but he's been soused in the South. Less salty than an olive."

"And I just thought it was the tender way he tapped the gin bottle to let it know vermouth was in the room. Isn't it called a Gibson, then?"

"Traditionally, it's called a Gibson, honey," Tru nodded. "But I certainly don't have the gravitas to correct Gilbert."

"Nor should you, there is probably some ancient rule book only the Gauls are privy to about such things. No doubt Gilbert is exploiting some caveat - best to enjoy his labor and not antagonize."

I sighed deeply.

“Awe honey,” Tru reached for my hand.

I smoothed the delicate stem of the Rosenthal martini glass before lifting it to my lips and lapping up the liquid. I was still a long way from drunk. “Tell me all you know, Tru- love,” I said wearily.

Truman signaled to Gilbert to bring a pitcher.

He unraveled it all for me. Truman had kept abreast of the scandal from letters for a month and shared nothing. I had no clue. He even took that damn ticket first, knowing that their affair was roaring like a brush fire. Bastard. He admitted it too, and apologized. Even as he sat there telling me about his betrayal, he seemed like my only friend in the world. No one else was brave enough to tell me. Not Babe or Marella. What a fool I was. When I finally got home, I rushed straight to Pammy’s digs for what was supposed to be an apartment christening dinner party. I was so trusting I didn’t even think it was strange that after being away for months, Christian wanted us to meet at her new home. Our life had always been like that, lots of social engagements. I simply thought Christian and I would be able to steal away early and get reacquainted.

Then Truman pointed out there were those who assumed I didn’t give a damn anyway. Especially since it was Babe who set up the first ‘date’ between them, my endorsement seemed implicit. I could only imagine how much this was debated and discussed on the dinner party/museum opening circuit. I poured myself another drink. I didn’t want to go home until I was drunk, ‘very drunk indeed.’

Chapter Twenty-four

“I really didn’t expect you back,” Christian began when he walked into our bedroom the morning after Truman and I had left him to his guilty conscience at old slut Harriman’s. Our liquid dinner at *La Côte Basque* ran rather late. It was now around eleven a.m. I had not expected Christian a moment sooner.

I’d been up for hours, reclined against two pillows pretending to read the tabloids, searching for mentions of my husband’s philandering ways. I was in full face, wearing enough war paint to camouflage a tribe, but the warrior in me was greatly subdued by the residue of last night’s martinis.

“Did I come home too soon darling?” I responded, “I do believe I wrote first to give you a heads up. I take it keeping your head up wasn’t a problem anyway.” I tried to grin wickedly. Instead I just sounded bitchy. I suppose I sounded bitchy a lot in retrospect. God dammit I’m sick of watching myself.

Christian pulled an armchair over to the bed and sat down.

“Let’s cut the shit, shall we Sun. You wrote me several times you were coming back and didn’t manage to show up on any of those occasions. I didn’t really think you’d show up at Pamela’s.”

I smoothed the sheets down and looked at him. He was waiting for some kind of response, I guess. His elbows rested on his knees and his chin on his laced fingertips.

“I’m not the one who needs to explain away my actions, Christian. I was not discovered with my BVD’s hugging my ankles.” I looked down at the sheet again. The

earnest way he was trying to hold my gaze was unsettling. I probably could have saved my marriage right at that moment. Why didn't I? Why didn't I just throw myself on his mercy and promise to take care of him better?

He leaned back, "No, not this time Sun. However, it could easily have been you, couldn't it?"

My head shot up, "Don't you dare try to turn this around," I rasped. A depressing sense of *déjà vu* came over me. Wesley and I had covered this ground before – but I wasn't 26 anymore. I was forty-six. In 1962, adultery didn't mean the end of a marriage; in fact, I knew from personal experience, adultery didn't mean much of anything at all. I had nothing to gain from playing the grand dame. My voice softened, "Look, it happened, it's more public than I'm sure either of us would like, but nonetheless, it's over, lets move forward."

He shook his head, his face looked drawn, "What do you mean move forward?"

He was not making this easy on himself. "I mean, I'm back, lets get back to our life." My chest felt cold.

"I guess I'm just not as sophisticated as you after all," he rubbed his temples.

The coldness spread to my fingertips. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I snapped.

"I can't resume a life I don't want. I'll send someone for my remaining things. I am staying with Pamela until I can find a place of my own."

"This is a place of your own," I inhaled deeply and smoothed the bed sheets again. I was freezing. My teeth started to chatter. I clenched my jaw, not trusting myself

to speak. He sat on the bed and held me. I leaned my head on his shoulder, thinking if I just stayed quiet he'd change his mind. We sat there for minutes saying nothing at all. I whispered, "What did I do?"

"Nothing," he whispered back. "It has nothing to do with you."

I leaned back, "That is the stupidest thing you have ever said. And that is saying something, since I have seen you drunker than a skunk trying to bed eighteen-year olds. This has everything to do with me. My husband is leaving me for another woman. I am taking this personally." And then, I am embarrassed to say, I prodded like a pathetic fading belle, "Do you think she's prettier than me? She's only going to get fatter you know."

He looked at me, astonished I guess. I'd never really been vulnerable before him.

"No Sunny, you're gorgeous. I could never get over the fact that I had a girl that looked this good and was really funny and smart besides. It's a rare combination, and you got a lot of mileage out of it with me. Fourteen years to be exact. But honey, you're that gorgeous and that funny for everybody. You don't treat anyone with particular favor, except maybe Truman." My hand tightened on his arm. I didn't really understand. I was trying to process so much. I wasn't smart at all.

"You're jealous of Truman?" I said stupidly.

He just shook his head. He looked very weary. "Sunny, I'm sixty-one. My heart is not in such great shape." He took in my worried expression, "I had a small scare while you were away. Nothing major, but enough to make me think." A cloud of guilt settled at the base of my neck. I'd been so thoughtless. "I'm tired of gallivanting, and, forgive me

for this, it's not very *mondaine*, I know, but I'm tired of my wife gallivanting. I want to stay at home and be with someone who wants to be there with me. When I am with you, we have no focus. We feel scattered together. We could go to the theatre or a movie, or go to Paris or Italy. For you it's not the destination it's the journey, it's about the going and it's not about me. Do you understand what I'm saying?" His eyes were pleading.

"And with Pamela?"

"She's a little older too. She's lead a very busy life and all she wants is to focus on me. Look maybe I'm just copping out, but dammit, I want a wife who wants to be around me."

"I want to be around you. I love you, very, very much," I could feel my mascara stinging my eyes, makeup streaking down my cheeks.

"Not really Sunny. You don't like staying in any place too long and you don't exactly like tending the ill."

I started to object, liar that I am, but he raised his hand and continued. "For the past month I have not eaten lunch one day at the Colony. Do you know why?" I shook my head. "Pamela has arranged lunch for me at her apartment everyday. Everyday, she has a masseuse come. Sometimes I'll just have my hands and head massaged; sometimes I'll lie down and take a full hour massage. It's been wonderful."

"I can do that."

"Sure you can do anything, but you'd be bored after a week of it, doing the same thing over and over. It's not who you are, and if we tried to make our life that way you'd leave me anyway, or at the very least despise me."

“I’m pretty close to hating you now. It’s a lose-lose proposition. Won’t you be bored? I know her, Christian, she’s a humorless bitch.”

“I’m ready to be bored; she takes really good care of me. Sure the conversation is not always lively, but then again, if it’s not, it’s my fault, because it always revolves around me.”

I dabbed my eyes with a handkerchief and sat up straighter. “You never seemed the type of man who would be satisfied with a nanny for a partner. You’ll tire of having your chin wiped soon enough. That’s okay, I’ll wait. Play for now, leave your stuff where it is. I’ll go off to visit Hem and you finish off with your English nursemaid. By the time I get back, the thing will have run its course.”

He shook his head again, “No Sunny. No.”

“Are you in love with her?” I wanted it spelled out as painfully as possible so that I would believe it. But the bastard was crueler than even he knew.

“No, Sun. Not at all. I’m in love with you, just not enough to live your life on your terms. I did for fourteen years. Long enough to know that is how it would always be. I’m tired and I don’t have the energy for it anymore. I don’t want it. Pamela and I want the same things.”

“For you to be massaged at lunch time,” I injected.

“Yes,” his face was blank now.

“What will I tell Cecily?”

“The truth - I’m sick and tired, and feeling older than I’d like. I want to be taken care of; tell her I needed an English nursemaid for all I care.”

“Oh I will - that and more,” I responded acidly.

He kissed my cheek and walked out the door.

The pain lanced me here, again, even in this partly vegetative state. It felt good. It felt great in fact. Maybe I had done all I could do. Maybe I was wrong in thinking I could have kept him. I forgot I'd offered him options. Life just didn't roll over me that time I really did try. The pain was hitting what would have been my temple had I had any form at all here, but it was mingled with relief.

Christian, Pamela and I juggled geography the first few months after our separation. New York is, of course, a tiny place both socially and geographically. Truman disputed this, but since I didn't go to bath houses or lope around the village looking for love, my social network remained fairly contained. Babe and her sister Minnie refused to have anything to do with the soon-to-be new Mrs. Marcus for awhile, but we were all thrown together so often, it became awkward to try and avoid them. And since I was single, over forty, female and counted my millions in the single digits I was not as socially desirable a creature at the time as the new scandal-tinted couple. People weren't cruel – they liked having me around, after all, I was still witty and hilariously entertaining on the subject of Pamela Churchill. Indeed I dined out on skewering her for weeks after the separation. But even vicious routines grow old. And I knew my time in New York was coming to an end. People wouldn't want to deal with the discomfort after a while; it's interesting only while

it's topical: "Oh we couldn't possibly go to Cole's tonight, Sunny's with us for dinner and you know how often Christian and Pamela end up there." I could see that quickly turning to: "That sounds like fun, let me call you back. I'll make up some excuse to Sunny. She'll understand."

So I decided to bail, before I was tossed out with last season's sling-backs.

Truman came to my rescue. He was working on his latest novel about the murdered Clutter family from Kansas and knew instinctively I had to get out of New York. He suggested I join him at his condo in Verbier. I arrived to find him completely engrossed in his book.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Truman titled me Countess shortly after we'd met. He'd seen me riding at Babe Paley's home Kiluna, in Manhasset. He decided my ability to ride like a boy and *look* like a girl was regal so he nicknamed me Countess. Femininity was something the horsy people he knew couldn't quite manage. He figured I should be an aristocrat. I appreciated the term infinitely more than 'Horse-Hag' which is how I usually referred to those who ran too zealously with the stable set.

He was sprawled over a white wicker chair and ottoman looking out over the stables to the left and Babe's glorious faery garden choc full of Columbine and Sweet Briar.

"I would have ranked you higher, darling, Duchess perhaps," he said at the time, looking over the Southern pansy in a straw hat and pale blue seersucker suit. "But those Windsors are so damned unattractive I thought you might take it as an insult." He was right about that. He took a long draw on his mint julep. I kissed his rosy cheek. He could be such a doll-baby.

I simply adored him, really anyone bashing the Duke and Duchess. While that tacky twosome were beloved by all who'd not made their acquaintance, the rest of us were left paying their lunch tab while watching the Duchess grow thinner. It was fairly amusing when the Duke was in attendance though, and we were privy to top-level information; he rarely taxed his intellect before speaking, so we could hardly wait to hear how Castro would do better diplomatically if only he would shave once in a while. One

of the duke's favorite bromides - an untidy person indicates an untidy mind.

Truman showed extraordinary kindness and generosity by inviting me to join him in the Alps. In 1961, he purchased a tiny condominium in Verbier, Switzerland. He and Jack Dunphy had wintered there and Truman loved the cold. Jack organized the household, skied and flirted with literary pretensions while Truman worked on his much anticipated non-fiction novel.

If one good deed can keep you from Hell, then this would have been the deed for Truman. I was so delighted to be anywhere but New York. It was a positive joy to curl up in the fetal position and wallow in my messed up life.

The first morning Tru brought me tea in bed. Jack had disappeared for a while, so Truman gave me his room while he stayed in Jack's. Cozily ensconced in his small nook upstairs, I sunk back into the feather pillows when he entered the space. It was lovely, unencumbered by decoration save for a plain wooden cross above the headboard. Tru placed the carved wood tray on the walnut ladder-back chair I used as a night table. He started poking at my toes.

"Rise and shine, Countess, no use hibernating in here all day. There are mountains to be climbed, songs to be sung and martinis to be made. No wallowing allowed."

"Oh Tru-love, this bed is so comfortable I don't think I can bear to leave it." The single bed was thick with wool blankets and pillows. Not the elaborate, albeit

comfortable chintz and pin-cushion styling I was used to, of course, but it fit my pared down lifestyle following my divorce from Christian.

“Ahh, but I’ve got a treat for you, my dear Sunny,” he sat down on the bed beside me, making a great show of wiggling his bottom.

“That sounds promising,” I said, “Lord knows it’s been awhile.”

He dove for my toes and tickled me senseless. Gasping for air, I crossed my two index fingers and held them in front of me to ward him off. He held his palms up submissively and snuggled into the covers.

“Contessa, what are we going to do with you?” He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Your guess is as good as mine, in fact I’d place money on yours, no doubt others are betting.” The last two months following my separation had been grueling. Christian, was busy planning his nuptials to the chubby Pamela Churchill. Our separation had forced Manhattan society to take sides. Unbeknownst to me the chi chi set had been watching Christian and Pamela’s affair evolve with avid interest. I, the duped bride, had been completely unaware that someone was sleeping in my bed.

“Well my guess is you’ll get married again, of course.”

“Uggghh.” I turned and buried my face in the pillow. “I...don’t....want...to,” I shouted. “I’m not any good at it.”

Truman laughed. “Not true. Not true at all. You’ve got quite a genius for it I’d say.”

Do you see why I fell under his spell?

I popped my head up to look him in the eyes. Genius was not a word I often heard attributed to me – beautiful, yes, chic, of course, and witty, damn right, but ‘genius,’ well that can turn a girl’s head. “Please explain.”

“Let’s take Pamela Churchill for example,” he began.

“Let’s not,” I glowered.

“Yes, lets,” he tidied the bedclothes briefly, then continued. “The only way she got Randolph Churchill to marry her was because he knocked her up. You can be damn sure, if it had been left up to him rather than his daddy, Winston Churchill’s grandson would have been a bastard.”

“He is a bastard, it just so happens he’s a legitimate one,” I couldn’t resist.

“Pay attention dearest; don’t just dive for the easy one.”

I snickered in spite of myself. Truman could always make things fun, even public humiliation.

“And during the war, when Randolph was off being a guerrilla journalist in some foxhole with a case of scotch and a tasty soldier boy or two...”

“Randolph? He wasn’t...?” I widened my eyes. Even I hadn’t heard that rumor.

“They all are, darling. Those public school boys and their belly rubs - the things I could tell you.”

“Oh Truman, the things you already have. I know more about your sex life than I do my own.”

“Now that’s not a ringing endorsement, darlin’,” he teased. “Anyway back to our Pammy and her wily ways. When Randolph was in some hole or other,” Truman paused

for effect, “Pamela was of course improving British/American relations by fucking both Averill Harriman and Jock Whitney. Neither of whom, despite her best efforts she managed to dislodge from holy matrimony into her own holy wedlock. Then there was the Baron de Rothschild in Paris and of course, Gianni Agnelli whom she even converted to Catholicism for.”

“Catholicism? The rest is old news, but Catholicism?”

Truman nodded sagely, “You can imagine the frocks she must have blown in order to pull that off.”

I giggled, “Yep, a divorced mum and mistréss to one of the most infamous swordsmiths in Italy. The Pope must have loved that.”

“Anyway, my point is, you’ve garnered more marriage proposals than you can shake a stick at. Christian is Pamela’s very first,” I winced, and Truman quickly said, “I don’t think Randolph ever proposed, he just showed up at the appointed time and place dragged, no doubt, by Mama Clementine and Papa Winston.”

“I love Christian. And he was mine to lose. I stayed away too long. I should never have gone to Europe with you,” I said accusingly. “You should have given me that goddamned boat ticket to get home sooner.” I shook my finger at him, but I wasn’t teasing.

“Enough with the recriminations. It’s time to be practical.” This was Truman’s favorite roll, Pygmalion. “You must remarry. And the sooner the better. Perhaps now is the time to troll in Pammy’s backyard.”

I grabbed a cigarette from the chair seat and lit one for him and one for me. I touched the side of the teapot. Our tea had gone cold. I knew what he was saying, after all it was part of the reason I was here, escaping or, more truthfully, hiding. There was only one place for an attractive woman at forty-six in 1962, and that was safely knotted in the bonds of marriage - unless, of course, she had scads of money, which I didn't. Christian was giving me an allowance, and I had managed to hold on to some of the earlier cash I'd parceled away, unbeknownst to Wesley. Still, I hated taking money from Christian and the slut. However, being a stylish girl, I acted like it was my due. I pretended to be smug about accepting their cash, about their support of my lifestyle, but I received my latest check amid mint-green stationary watermarked with a 'P' and 'C' entwined. Needless to say I ground my teeth a little further down. I had limited face-saving options. I could devote my life to helping the impoverished in a third world-country. But the impoverished are smelly and diseased and the only third-world countries I knew of were too hot for my fair complexion. I could sell myself into whoredom as a companion to aging millionaires, but I don't care for wrinkly dicks anymore than the next person. I said as much to Tru.

He inhaled the smoke from his cigarette, slowly letting it seep from his mouth into his nostrils then out. The gray mist caught on the ceiling fan and dispersed. "I think it's time for a title."

I shook my head vigorously. I may have been dumped, but I still had standards. "I will not have Euro trash." Few things are as ludicrous as an American going abroad and

returning home the titled wife of some Duke exiled from a tiny country with a GNP smaller than Maine's - look at the Princess Radziwill.

"Noooo. I'm not talking about becoming the Queen of Latvia, my silly darling."

"Good, because you have a better shot at it than I do."

"Like I said before, don't dive for the easy ones."

I laughed.

"Go for the real thing, one of the peerage, you know, the United Kingdom, a real Duke or Lord or whathaveyou - the kind that comes equipped with a castle or two and plenty of stable boys."

"Ahh, something for everyone," I replied. Then I shook my head. "Frankly Tru-love, all I really want to do is sleep." I wriggled down in the bed again. It was all too much to think about. "Despite what you may think, I have only ever married for love and I'm not about to become a conniving gold digger now." Plus, I still loved Christian, I always would. If I hadn't been so goddamned selfish maybe...

"It's just as easy to love a rich man as a poor man. Easier in fact."

"Thank you, Lorelei Lee," I retorted. "I might as well, move to deepest, darkest Africa."

"Hmm?" Tru looked confused.

"Never mind." I replied.

"The thing is Countess, you cannot simply slide around Manhattan until you slip completely off the radar screen."

I looked up at him, my mouth tight with anger.

“Don’t make me spell it out for you. You are too attractive to be a desirable dinner guest for an insecure hostess – and in Manhattan they are all insecure. You’re friends are sticking by you now while it’s fresh, but give them a few months, even Babe.”

“What about Babe?” I questioned sharply.

“She knows about your little flirtation with Bill, Sunny, she’s not an idiot. She may not have caught you two together, but she can sense these things. And it’s fine as long as you are somebody’s wife. But as a floater, you are a threat, and sooner or later you’ll slip up, doors will close. If Babe shuts you out, who’s going to defy her?”

I took a deep breath and lay back on my pillows. The enormity of my situation stayed with me. In a quiet voice, staring into my hands I asked, “You’d defy her, wouldn’t you Tru-love?”

He waited a second too long before he said, “Of course, Contessa.”

He bounced on the bed. “In any case how ‘bout I take your mind off your troubles,” he grinned. He stood and smoothed the bed clothes. “Do you want to see the early chapters?” His blue eyes glittered – at five feet two with a large round head he resembled a sweet-tempered imp when he was happy. Like something out of Peter Pan, but off-off-off Broadway.

“Oh, Tru, yes!” I said astonished and delighted to be asked, I knew he was doling this out as some kind of consolation for his unspoken betrayal, but I played along. What choice did I have? I couldn’t scream or rant or rave, who would care? In that way my time on earth was great preparation for Hell. I suspected then I had no Savior. Now I know I don’t. Imagine that if you can – no hope, no out, no dreams, no imaginings.

Tru'd been working hard to create a new style of journalist fiction, more sophisticated than straight reporting but taking its content from current events. This book focused on the execution of two men who murdered a family. There was already considerable buzz about them given Truman's reputation and his oddly intimate relationship with one of the murderers. He had done five years worth of research that he'd shared with no one except perhaps, Jack.

I flew through the pages he handed me, halfway through each sheaf I called out "More! More, Dammit!" and heard his devilish chuckle.

He'd then crash through the door like a new scullery maid. Deposit the next pages on the bed, saying in his distinctive fey voice "Your latest installment of unbridled genius ma'am."

After bellowing my last request for more sketches, Truman came in wagging his finger. "That's enough for now Countess," he said, "You'll have to wait like everybody else," and because he couldn't resist, "What do you think?"

He lightly prodded the pillows behind me as I sat up in bed. He tucked my blankets in around my toes and cranked open the windows. I had a postcard view. The mountains cut paper sharp angles into a watercolor Swiss sky. Music box-style chalets were thick as cloud rings around the town proper, thinning out as the air did. It was a deliciously mild morning - air so fresh it seemed mentholated with evergreens.

I slid out of bed, upsetting all of the pages I had spread before me and kissed him on top of his scant blond hair.

“Sweetie they’re brilliant. A little shocking, but really, really *new*. You’ve done it. I’ve never read anything like these.” I couldn’t sing his praises enough. I knew he was brilliant – everyone said so. I was profoundly flattered he shared them with me.

He managed to convey the events of the night of the murders with chilling reportage more effective than melodrama. His empathy and emotional attachment to one of the murderers did not color his judgment as people had predicted it would. Just how attached he got I never asked. He sheltered most of us from his men in those years before his bastion of Mitty men, unless of course you count Jack, but nobody really did.

This was, of course, his masterpiece, and though I didn’t know it at the time, his last major artistic work - at least as far as I was concerned. I told him it would make a marvelous film – a thought that hadn’t occurred to him genius though he was.

Truman was first credited with brilliance because of some short stories he published in *Mademoiselle* and Harper’s. Though happy to hail him a genius, they couldn’t come across with serious cash. It wasn’t until his publication of Breakfast at Tiffany’s in 1958 – a novella that had Stork Club debts teetering on his doorstep in their bowed leather slingbacks each claiming to be his inspiration – that he actually got some money behind him. He followed *Breakfast* by writing a script for a movie called *The Innocents*, publishing some collected writings and becoming a man of means. Early on he discovered the joys of the stuffed billfold.

So at the mention of cash, his eyes glinted with the possibility. He asked, not so innocently, “A movie?”

“Yes, desperate characters, shocking atrocities and its true!”

“But Contessa that’s too tacky, tacky, tacky don’t you think?” he could actually squeak with a Southern accent.

“Darling,” I said. “Big, fat, *faux* pearls are tacky, tacky, tacky, but did that stop Coco? Of course not – it’s all timing and authority. You’ve got artistic credibility, take it for a spin and seen how much it’s worth. It’s going to be a big, fat book. There are lots of folks who aren’t going to read it just because of that. You’ll be bringing literature to the unwashed masses. *C’est très noble!*”

“How would one go about selling movie rights to an unfinished book?”

“You get a movie agent – and not a book editor, a real agent. You should have no problem; you’re far enough along to start the process.” I had learned something along the way from Wesley and Christian.

“Great,” he said with a sly smile, “You do it for me Sunny. You be my agent - you know people.”

That was an understatement, of course I knew people. I knew everybody. In Hollywood, New York and much of Europe, but I didn’t do anything. I never really had.

“Oh, Tru darling,” I demurred. “I wouldn’t know where to begin; I don’t know *how* to be an agent.”

“You were married to the best.”

“Yes, and he ditched me like a last-call whore,” I replied piteously. “Oh Tru, this is such an important property, I would be terrified to take it on.”

He nodded, but ignored me, “I know you can do it Countess. And just think what it would do for you.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“If you’re my agent,” he explained with exaggerated patience, “you and I have a contract and every trip you take, every book store you visit, everything you do is tax deductible. You can write off a truckload of expenses and you’ll get a percentage of what the rights sell for . . . get my drift Contessa?”

I saw where Tru was going with this. Husbandless, I was on rather shaky financial ground, a first for me since early adulthood. I was just twenty-one when I’d met Wesley. Truman’s kindness at this time was incomparable. With most of my society ‘friends’ I could not even begin to discuss my finances. I’d just as soon talk about crotch-less panties at breakfast, than discuss a lack of money at any time.

Naturally, I was terrified of going into the marketplace with such a concept. But I went. Actually I just called Christian and told him to tell people – I figured he owed me. I guess he figured he owed me too because the offers came in right away. Everyone loved the idea. I was soon turning down substantial sums for the early sixties: \$250,000 from United Artists, \$300,000 from MGM. Though the book was unfinished, I was certain if I could hold out long enough I could get a million dollars.

In the meantime, Tru kept slapping away at the keys, blood flowing from his fingertips. Gin flowing through his veins. I gave him updates on the bidding wars. He seemed to enjoy our partnership as much as I did. I certainly didn’t have time to miss married life. We became quite close. I stayed on in Verbier, eventually getting my own place courtesy of my ex-husband and his wife-whore who were both happy to keep me across the Atlantic. We had regular lunches and dinners. We even traversed the Atlantic

to spend weeks at a time in New York together. Christian had purchased an apartment in the San Remo on the Upper West Side for me as my settlement. We even went on weekend trips to the country with friends. Although he lived very simply, there were few things Tru loved better than lapping up the luxury provided by others. We played very well together. Mostly because we didn't give a damn about what anybody else thought, or so I assumed. Truman corrected me.

One weekend we were at Betsy Whitney's country estate Greentree right beside Babe's Kiluna on Long Island. The party in the main salon was breaking up. We headed to our respective rooms. Tru followed me into mine as usual, and then slipped a pot of lip goo into my hand.

"Wear this," he said, "It will make you even more delectable."

"Do you wear it?" I asked.

"Absolutely!" he teased, pouting his lips, "Can't you tell?" He was so wondrous and childlike then. He loved expensive luxuries, but also took great delight in the simple nonsense of life. He sat on my bed as I undressed – it felt like I was disrobing in front of my daughter, except he was smiling – and he observed all my pre-bed rituals, the slathering of cold cream and a hundred strokes with my ivory hairbrush. The bed was already turned down for the night but he pulled the covers down farther and I hopped in. He tucked me in and lightly stroked my cheek.

"Sweet dreams my darling, I adore you," he said softly. At 11:00 p.m. Tru was actually still dapper. His dark suit fit well for once, his bow tie looked newly tied. I reached for his soft hand and held it in mine.

“I adore you too Tru-love,” I said, thinking how lovely it was to have such a man in my life. Only gay boys truly like aging women.

He stepped back from my bed and let go of my hand, his eyes hardened slightly.

“No you don’t Contessa, not really.”

“Of course I do,” I protested.

“Not truly, no one really does, I’m an oddity, I’m just smart enough to know it and work with it,” he laughed without happiness. “It’s hard for people to look at or listen to me when they first meet me. Perhaps Jack is the only one who has ever really accepted me. For the rest I put on my act. To make it easier on them.”

“Your act? Truman, stop.”

“Yes, like when I meet someone for the first time. I don’t go up to them straight and say ‘how do you do?’ like a hundred other normal people. Can you imagine if I did – this funny little man with the squeaky voice just demanding to be taken seriously? How awful, what a load of pressure to put on the average person. They would never want to meet me. So I giggle, maybe do a pirouette, tip my hat and courtesy. I play the jester with a heart and that makes it easier for them. They can laugh. And that makes it easier for me.” There was no self-pity in his voice. He was simply calling it as he saw it.

He was right, but not about the love. I did love Truman in a sense, we all did. Not the way he wished to be loved – completely, as a mother should love a child. That kind of love requires complete trust, something I could never quite commit to. And, of course, he was so different. After leaving him for the evening; one had to readjust to seeing him again because he did look like such an odd, dwarfish fellow. It was a shock, every time.

But after a few seconds you didn't notice anymore - he was just brilliant, funny, bitchy Tru-love, your friend and in some cases confidante.

The problem was of course that he was everyone's confidante. In the circles we traveled the currency of friendship was someone else's dirty knickers. I clued in fairly early, but still it did not stop me from talking. He was such fun to talk to. Truman used to regale me with stories of his early years – sad, pathetic stories that made me feel I could respond in kind, after all he'd shared so much (and in effect I felt I had so much on him he wouldn't dare share my confidences, lest I do the same). But not too long after we'd met, I dragged him on the *Christina*, Onassis' yacht. I knew that crowd would adore him. I introduced him to Marella Agnelli, wife of Gianni Agnelli chairman of the board at Fiat. She was a winsomely beautiful member of the jet set as they were called, as *we* were called, I suppose. Soon as I left him, I overheard him sharing similar painful memories to those he'd described to me - his mother's suicide, the ridicule in the South, life in the suburbs. I tried to warn her. I should have taken my own advice. He would observe people and see their soft spots; he became a father confessor. Later on, after the scandal, she referred, to him as a “falcon” waiting for her “tender intimacies.” He was like that with all of us.

That was the first time I was disappointed with Truman. The second was at a luncheon at the Colony, the La Grenouille of the day. Beginning of the sixties, he'd invited the lot of us. C.Z., Babe, Marella the evil Pamela Churchill. We found ourselves with a big bunch of friends who all had more or less the same relationship with him. He called us swans, supposedly because of our long necks and regal demeanor. I was miffed.

Too many swans. Some, I thought, ghastly. Some, I admired enormously, so on one side I was flattered, but on the other, there were too many. The things I shared with him were personal, special. It seems he giggled and laughed and shared as much with them as with me.

I waited till he made his way over to me. He was greeting all his ladies, when he finally reached up to kiss me I said “Have you never heard that less is more, Darling?”

He clasped my hand and grasped my subtext. His smile did not reach his eyes. “More is always more darling, you know that, think of it in terms of shoes.” Then he launched into a ridiculously personal story that showed him in a bad light, an offering I think. I almost responded in kind, as usual, but for once held back.

It has since been my policy to be careful with those so willing to gossip about themselves. They know no boundaries. If they don’t respect their own privacy how can you trust them with yours?

By the time I’d received Truman’s newest pages of In Cold Blood - which were even more exciting - I was dating a member of the peerage as Tru had predicted. Lord Roan Appleby, who owned one of the studios bidding on Tru’s project. I was living very comfortably in London in Roan’s Mayfair digs and had inherited the remains of Wesley’s surprisingly substantial estate. Since my reversal of fortune I felt it was a conflict to hang on to the publishing rights of the material.

I didn’t want him to misunderstand my withdrawal from the project so I told him I was too removed from the American publishing world to do any good.

“Love, what you need is a really tough, ballsy agent like Swifty Lazar.”

Swift Lazar was a ruthless, professional agent to the stars, famous for sweating a penny into a dime. He was just the man to take the job.

“But Countess I don’t know Swift Lazar and I’ve heard dreadful things about him,” Truman protested. We were in the dining room at the Ritz in Mayfair. Charles brought us to my usual cozy table right in the center of things. Aristocracy-by-association had its rewards. Not wanting to waste a minute of my time with Truman I ordered champagne to start. Great cure for a hang-over. I’d taken to drinking it daily. Truman had flown in to stop me from slitting my wrists to avoid another evening with Roan’s dreary friends. Each weekend I was expected to provide lodging and entertainment for his Lordship’s hunt pals. His dingy, drafty country house was located in the middle of nowhere, barely outfitted to serve rodents decently. The Brits still had a war mentality when it came to dining. I demanded Truman come play court jester. He could amuse me while I figured out how to improve the quality of the kitchen export. He and I escaped back to London. The typical hunt country Sunday breakfast of underdone bacon and overdone eggs was the final straw.

“Well of course you’ve heard dreadful things about him,” I said, watching Charles uncork the bottle with a flourish. “I’ve probably said them. He’s a little bastard. Several times he’s nearly shut down one of Christian’s plays just moments before opening day over some stupid contractual dispute. But if Christian had a property, Swift would be his pimp of choice. Anyway love, you’ll *adore* the Hollywood crowd. *Everybody* plays with Swift.” This was the payoff for Truman, of course, new people - new gossip.

“But Contessa this was supposed to help you,”

“I know sweetheart and I appreciate it so much, but I really don’t need the money now. I’d feel terrible taking a piece of it. And Roan said the tax implications for me if I take it as income are negative.”

“I see,” he cast his eyes down and studied the stiff linen tablecloth.

“Darlin’ I just wouldn’t be doing you any favors. And I know that Swifty will beat the entire movie industry into submission and get a real charge out of doing it.” I eventually brought him round to my idea. Privately I was surprised the two had not crossed paths yet. They would make quite the duo, bespectacled and tiny, yet ferocious as bulldogs. They would either embrace or rumble on sight.

Luckily, Swifty gladly turned his hand to this high profile project. I figured if anybody could get a million bucks for Truman’s book it was this famous all-balls operator. And I was right, within a few months Truman had his million dollar deal.

Inexplicably, I still got a check. Truman insisted to Swifty that I still get a small percentage for my earlier services. I don’t know why. He never mentioned to me that he’d put it in the contract, but still there it was. The first I heard of it was from my ex-Christian. He called me from his yacht in Cannes, during the festival no less.

“Sunny, get your cash and accept nothing but cash. Don’t let that little bastard get away with anything.” He began the conversation, as he did most things, in a dreadful rush.

“Christian sweetheart, is it time for another Dr. Feelgood injection?” I replied. Everyone I knew was submitting to those miraculous needles from a shady German named Max Jacobson

“I’m talking about Swifty, sweetheart, pay attention now, I’m going to recite some numbers, try to stay alert.” Patronizing prick. “Swifty owes you \$25,000 and he’s gonna try and get out of it. That guy has never written a non-deductible check in his life. Take the cash.”

Christian filled me in on the rest of the story. Sure enough, later that day I got a delightful note from Swifty offering me a bauble from the jewelry store of my choosing. Forewarned is forearmed and I had occasion to laugh at his expense – a rare and rich moment I described to appreciative audiences on both coasts and across the Atlantic where I was still living. To Christian and Truman’s delight I held out for the cash. To my chagrin by the time I paid taxes on it I might as well not have bothered - certainly not when the long distance charges were added in.

Truman’s book was finally published in hardcover in 1966 by Random House. It followed on the heels of the hanging of Perry Smith and Dick Hickok, the convicted killers. In Cold Blood was a huge success, a record-breaking financial coupe. The press exposure was unprecedented. One couldn’t pick up a newspaper or magazine, or turn on the radio and television without finding out about Truman Capote. Life magazine ran eighteen pages, more than it had ever offered a writer before. Even Times Square was a conspirator in the publicity machine with a huge electronic billboard constantly flashing the words In Cold Blood. It appealed to everyone – literati, voyeurs, criminologists.

The insanity reached its pinnacle with fisticuffs at “21” Club. The movie director Otto Preminger accused Swifty Lazar of reneging on a promise to sell him the film rights as a starring vehicle for Frank Sinatra. Can you see Frank Sinatra slicing somebody’s

neck? Well, actually so can I, but still, I can't imagine it enhancing for his image.

Anyway, it was very nasty. Otto chose well from his very colorful vocabulary and Lazar responded by crashing a water goblet on Preminger's bald pate. Fifty stitches later, the episode was termed 'L'Affaire '21' and was covered in the papers nationwide.

Truman was now utterly famous and utterly purposeless. Before he'd been hard working - if a bit of a lush - he'd stuck to his routine and was always in bed by 11:30, so he could be asleep by twelve. "Countess," he used to say to me, "If your little Truman's not in dreamland by midnight, he's lost a days work – nobody likes a lazy drunk."

After the success of In Cold Blood, he spent more time in Minnie (Babe's eldest sister) and Jimmie Fosburgh's Upper East Side 'salon' discussing his brilliance rather than displaying to the waiting page. He had always lived sparsely – he'd had to. But now the two million he got from the book and movie rights let him be indulgent, even after the tax man cometh. Before, his old jaguar had been his only real luxury, now he traded it in for a later model, a convertible. He left his rental in Brooklyn Heights and bought a two bedroom in *the* new address in Manhattan, the United Nations Plaza at First Avenue and Forty-Ninth Street, next to the East River and the United Nations. He was invited everywhere. This was not just limited to New York and L.A. now, but even D.C. He was a force with coattails of his own and for two years he coasted. He spoke of a new collection he was working on that was top secret and more controversial than anything he'd ever done. This new triumph would assure his place as the greatest American writer of the twentieth century.

Answered Prayers, as the collection was called, for those of you too young to remember, did assure his place in history and his place in Hell if I had anything to say about it. The book was never completed; only four chapters from it were published in *Esquire*. *Mojave*, *Unspoiled Monsters*, *Kate McCloud* and of course *La Côte Basque, 1965* featuring a narrator named Lady Ina Coolbirth - a big, breezy broad of a woman, a real California girl who was schtupping her best-friend's wealthy, Jewish husband. Through Coolbirth's lips many prominent members of New York society were trashed and tattled on. The most damning, of course, was the bit on the lovely, widow Ann Woodward.

Now pay attention, this was the very big deal. This was what damned him on earth and perhaps here too. If only I was allowed to see who was here. Anyway, Ann Woodward was a showgirl who married into one of America's leading families. She ended up shooting her naked husband at point-blank range because she thought he was an intruder. No one believed her. But her mother-in-law stood by her to protect the family name and she got off scot-free.

Ann quickly became a social outcast in New York, in spite of her mother-in-law's efforts to keep up appearances. Her mother-in-law was virtually the only one to be seen with her in public for their weekly lunches. Before the murder, Ann had been a scheming, ambitious tart, dressed to kill (apparently) in Balenciaga, no one was fooled by her, but they pretended - mostly because she played by the rules. Interestingly, when Salvador Dali painted her picture, rumor had it that it so revealed her calculating character she

destroyed it with a kitchen knife immediately. Personally I think that was malicious gossip – Ann would never go near the *kitchen*.

She eventually fled to Europe, where she hoped to be treated with somewhat more understanding. Silly bitch, the important Europeans *understand* a love of money but they sure as hell don't romanticize it, and the Eurotrash simply recognized her as one of their own and treated her accordingly.

She met Truman in a bar in the mountain resort of St. Moritz. They had known one another by reputation, having feted at the same locales over the years. Little is known of the exchange – no doubt Truman was being naughty – but Ann is reported to have called him "that little fag" loudly. Truman, *allegedly*, looked directly at her, held out his arm and trigger finger and said equally loudly, "Bang! Bang! Bang!" Ann became known forever after as "Bang Bang" Woodward.

It works on so many levels.

Ann fell into a much needed obscurity for a time. She quietly returned to New York and resumed her lunch schedule with her mother-in-law. She tended to her now nearly grown boys. She managed to outlive her past. She was rarely mentioned in salons anymore. The crime of the century no longer big news till *La Côte Basque, 1965* appeared in Esquire. The newsstands couldn't keep the issue in stock.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“You like him better than me.” Truman pouted. The ‘He’ he was referring to was Hemingway. Tru had come to my San Remo apartment to take me to the Colony for lunch. We decided to meet in Manhattan before I headed off to England after my very short visit with the Hemingways.

We decided to cut through the Park so Tru could walk Charlie, his ever-present mutt. It was a long walk but a beautiful one on this clear, sunny day. “He’s just after a piece of tail, you know, your tail.”

“Well this tail’s currently between my legs,” I replied, and then snickered at the double *entendre*. Thanks to Pamela and Christian’s impending marriage I felt less than potent, but at least I could laugh about it, sort of. There was a slight breeze and I was thankful I’d had the foresight to wear low Ferragamos. I swear I could walk to the end of Hell in those lovely hand-stitched shoes – everybody should own a pair.

“You didn’t answer the question,” he persisted. He wasn’t interested in my problems. He wanted to whine about his insecurities.

I sighed. I was in no mood for his ‘mean reds’; I had my own to deal with. “I wasn’t aware you’d asked one,” I dismissed wearily and bent down to scratch Charlie J.

Fatburger. He snuffled appreciatively. Tru was so obnoxious about that beast. I loathe it when people get nutty about animals. It's too needy. I stood up again to cross the street.

"Wait," Tru insisted, as I moved to cross. "Charlie's not finished his constitutional."

"Oh, for Christ sake, Truman, Charlie's constitutional turns a ten minute walk into a half-hour. I do think you should have his bowels inspected," I said waspishly, knowing he now would not rest until he saw a vet.

Tru drove me to distraction with the wants and needs of that dog. We'd found him while rifling through Harrods in London in the summer of 1961. His beloved Kelly, a Kerry blue terrier, who knew his place, unlike Charlie, had recently died and Truman and Jack were despondent. They'd had Kelly since 1950. Picking up some last minute items before we had to board a plane for Manhattan, Tru heard a yelp. He turned to the first available sales clerk and asked, "Is there a pet shop here?" We were brought immediately through a hallway to a room that housed an owl, a macaw, a parrot and "the most adorable, cuddly little bulldog pup you've ever seen!" he gushed.

He rushed over to the saleswoman and said, "I've bought that bulldog."

"No sir, you haven't. That's special order," she replied. "That particular one is not for sale. However we can order you another."

“No,” replied Truman. “That dog is mine. I wish to buy that dog. Here is my checkbook.”

“You can’t buy that dog, sir,” she now insisted, flustered, her face reddening. “Besides, he costs fifty-five pounds!”

“My dear woman.,I’ve come all the way form Spain and have been directed straight to that dog. It is my destiny to have that dog.” Sure enough destiny prevailed, or at least the poor saleswoman did not feel equal enough to battle with it. Since then Charlie was his constant companion and we always waited for him to finish his ‘constitutional.’

“Charlie’s bowels are fine, thank you very much,” Tru returned defensively. “How are Hemingway’s?”

“I am not going to discuss Hemingway with you, darling. It’s too tiresome.” I turned away to hail a cab, deciding a long walk with Truman when he was this moody would be no fun at all. The cabbie looked disapprovingly at Charlie, but said nothing as Tru stepped in the car. “Take us to the Colony,” I instructed.

“Some things too intimate to discuss Dear-heart?” Truman mocked, continuing our conversation. “You want to protect your tender feelings toward that bloated Neanderthal with the fake chest hair. Dream of tucking yourself under that damp, bestial, armpit, protected from the world?” He barely sputtered this out, so taken was he with his image. I couldn’t help but join him in laughter.

“Oh do fuck off, Truman. You know how you get about writers.”

“How I get?” He mimicked, then exaggerated my round tones. “No, how do I get about writers? Charlie and I are always fascinated by your insights into our character.”

“Despite the physical resemblance, you and Charlie do not share a sole character. You despise other writers in general. You hate them. You are always bad-mouthing one or the other of them.”

“That is a gross generalization. I’ve barely mouthed any of them – though I’m sure a few would enjoy it – your ‘Hem’ especially,” he puckered his lips. “There are certainly some writers, who, I feel are overrated. But that is simply literary criticism. I happen to have high standards, that’s all.” He sniffed.

“Darling, you’re a jealous bitch. You get no greater pleasure than reading someone else’s bad review. It gets you happier than gin.”

“See you go too far, nothing gets me happier than gin – except Mr. Fatburger here.” He scratched Charlie’s ample chin. “I simply do not care for the pretentious, self-proclaimed intellectuals who beaver away in substandard English departments harshly judging any output that is not from their own charmed circle.”

“You would certainly never beaver,” I teased.

“Well maybe, once or twice, but I would not enjoy it.”

“Your venom is saved for academia.”

“Give me an example.”

“Lillian Hellman. You called her George Washington in drag. Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer, Hemingway, Jack Kerouac – may I paraphrase – ‘it’s not writing, it’s just typing.’ Even Harper Lee, your dear, dear friend.”

“What did I say about Harper Lee?” he questioned sharply.

“That you mostly wrote her book.” The cab was stuck in traffic. I tugged off my gloves to search my pocketbook for my lighter. “So, I can’t talk to you about Hemingway because you hate him - which makes everything I say defensive or stilted and everything that you say peevish and nasty.”

“I like Bill Faulkner,” he said after a minute, absently tugging Charlie’s ear.

“Pity is not the same thing as like, Tru. He’s a good, ole boy drunkard and you don’t find him threatening.”

“Now, that’s unfair. He’s a brilliant writer, he just needed help. You know Bennett used to give him the keys to Random house when Bill was in town, so he’d have a place to work. I used to see him there a lot at night – at least until Bennett complained to Bill about his drinking. It made the office reek like a low-rent bar. People would come to work in the morning and find him pickled on Bennett’s couch.”

“That couldn’t have been good for business.”

“No, but that’s when nobody knew who he was, really. He is just a gentle, gentle man. I think the world is too much for him. One time, he came to a party I had, I don’t know where you were, maybe you weren’t even there, I don’t remember. Anyway, he got drunk and asked if he could take a bath. He was in the tub for nearly an hour and I got worried, so I went into the bathroom and there he was, naked as a jaybird, sitting in a lukewarm tub crying his eyes out. I just sat down on the toilet beside him. We didn’t say a word to each other, but still I felt it was a comfort that I was there.”

“So you pity him,” I repeated.

“No, Contessa,” he exclaimed, “I identify with him.” We had finally reached Fifth. Charlie was scratching his ear in earnest and I suspect contemplating another constitutional. Midday traffic was getting worse if possible. It was hard to tell where the morning rush hour had left off and the noon rush hour began. It was then I realized I’d forgotten my wallet.

“Oh Tru, we have to go back, I’ve left my wallet at home.” I assumed he would offer to spot me lunch. Lord knows I’d covered for him often enough. But instead he said:

“Driver back to San Remo please.”

“Just let us out at 74th please, driver,” I clarified.

“I know where the San Remo is, lady,” the driver replied, miffed. “Rita Hayworth lives there.”

Truman started laughing, and said, rather unkindly, “You and Miss Hayworth close?”

The driver just rolled his eyes and muttered, “Everybody’s a joker in this town.” He didn’t say another word for the rest of the ride up Central Park West.

I looked at Truman reprovingly. He shrugged his shoulders and turned his head to look at me, “What? I was simply ascertaining the gentleman’s connections.”

“Play nice.”

“Well, Charlie,” he said, picking up the dog and holding him a few inches from his face. “It seems our conduct is not all that it should be. The lady is not impressed. Perhaps if I borrow some of your fur, and paste it too my chest, it will be more to her liking.”

I decided to let him have a go at Hem. He wouldn’t give me a moment’s peace until I did and we were going to be in that cab for awhile at this point. So I began, “You yourself said *Big Two-Hearted River* was the best American short story.”

As I expected, Truman’s head reared up and his eyes glittered in indignation. “Oh my, my, my, that time in uncivilized company must have addled your brain.”

“You didn’t say that?” I replied mildly.

“No, I certainly did not, I said he wrote maybe nine or ten fine short stories and *Big Two-Hearted River* was one of them. Do I think it’s the best or even one of the best American short stories? No. I don’t think anything Hemingway ever did was the best of anything. There is a mean man.”

I thought about the way Hem treated Mary and even sometimes Bill Powell, and I couldn’t disagree. Instead I asked, “How would you know, you’ve never met him before have you?”

“No, and that’s just the thing. I got a very rude letter from him once, but that’s not the strangest thing. He did a book blurb for an author I’ve never heard of before or since that said, ‘All you Capote fans, get your hats and get your coats, here comes a real writer.’ He’s mentioned me negatively, many times, in little things he’s written. Then, there was that article in the Times, ostensibly about baseball, but he used it to whack me in the head a couple of times. I’ve never even met him.”

“Tru, I didn’t realize. Those are very good reasons to dislike him.” The cabbie stopped in front of my building. Tru paid him and Charlie helped me out.

“Oh, I don’t hate him because of that, Contessa.” We stood on the sidewalk while Charlie inspected a tree. “I hate him because he’s a phony. A big, hairy phony. He’s a dishonest closet queen and closet everything else. I don’t buy that whole act he puts on.”

“I don’t think it’s an act, Truman.”

Truman raised a knowing eyebrow, “Oh it’s an act Contessa, anybody who tracks beautiful things, be it women, birds or marlins just to destroy them is trying to prove something.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I had met a man in England – you remember, I had mentioned him earlier, Roan. He was of the peerage and exactly what Tru-Love wished for me. Well, I was willing to explore the possibility of love again. And I liked the idea of spending some time in Merry Old England. Being a huge Mitford and Wodehouse fan, I was convinced I loved the British sensibility. That divine directness so many Americans view as nasty. But reading the Brits is one thing, living among them quite another. I let a flat in Mayfair for six months. This time I brought Cecily along. She had been dumped in boarding school after boarding school but now she was old enough for me to actually have a conversation with, so I thought it might be fun to get to know her and England at the same time. Luckily café society is only slightly bigger regular society so I had many letters of introduction and already knew scads of people through friends.

Cecil Beaton was my real entrée into society, I suspect Truman had primed him before I arrived. He and Tru were two peas in a pod – gay, opinionated, extreme snobs, thoughtlessly cruel and very, very fun. Cecil was a real climber. He introduced me to every musty duke and lord available, as well as some wonderful café types. London in the sixties was thrilling. If I were given a chance to pick a time to revisit that would be the time period. I was lucky enough to witness the Carnaby Street scene personally. Just as Truman prophesied, old clothing stores were popping up everywhere, labeling

themselves ‘vintage.’ Suddenly anyone could be chic, from shop girl to duchess. In fact, unless you were a Duchess with a cockney accent, chances are the shop girls were considered more ‘it.’ It was terrifically equalizing.

Oh Damn, I’m losing you or me at least. Why does this keep happening? Nothing again. Just me. I wonder what will happen when I reach the end. Who are you anyway? Are you real or have I conjured you up just to have someone to talk to. I feel your presence like a sinner feels the presence of a priest in the next confessional. Maybe you are here to judge me or to set me free. No I must not hope. Hope is the enemy of peace. But I can’t have peace – Hell doesn’t offer peace – so I might as well hope.

Here I am, it seemed quick that time. Better. So on with the story. Cecily was miserable in London. Cecily’s my daughter – I’ve mentioned her before. Anyway she was with me in Mayfair and she’s a drip. It was simply a state of being for that child. Nothing ever pleased her. She was in London - *the* Zeitgeist city, and all she could do was mope about New York and Christian. She was nineteen for goodness sake; it wasn’t as if she had to come with me. She could have stayed with her father, or enrolled in a college, or become a waitress. The latest women’s movement could have inspired her. I am not inclined to think women working is a terrific idea, but if they have neither charm nor beauty, I see no help for it.

But she wished to follow me. I thought it was because she knew she could do things in London. Young people were designing and making music and celebrating youth. She didn't even see it.

I tried, I actually made an effort. Since it was just the two of us now and she was completely verbal and toilet-trained, I tried to befriend her. I took her out to concerts and plays. We saw the Oliviers several times and were invited backstage and befriended. Joan Plowright was utterly delightful; Olivier, himself, of course was a big fag. Joan didn't seem to mind, and I generally prefer gay men to most creatures. I also got to meet my heroine Nancy Mitford on an excursion to Paris. She was as droll in person as she was in her narratives. Her sister, however - Diana - was a pill. The Mitford clan was unbelievably close considering how different their world views were. United, I suppose, by the common belief of their mental and social superiority. Naturally, I concurred. They had such wonderful speaking voices, I took to aping them at dinner parties and hunt weekends for the amusement of my hosts and fellow guests.

"Muv, you silly twat, have you thought about what an impossible thing it is for me to be pregnant." I pretended to be talking to Mother Mitford, at a dinner party Cecily and I had been invited to. Diana Mitford-Mosley was a favorite target of mine; unlike Nancy, she was often humorless and self-important and still electric with facism. "You'll simply have to take the child - at least till it's out of nappies. If a child of mine is going to shit, I'd rather it be on your dreadful sofa. I simply can't entertain Mosley's cretinous associates on shat-upon upholstery, you do understand, don't you Muv, nothing distracts the spirit of revolutionaries more quickly than nappy stench." I bowed to fast and furious

applause. Perhaps Wesley was right, maybe acting could have been my true calling. As usual, Cecily was the only one not laughing or applauding. She was such a dry stick. We sat in silence for most of the taxi-ride home. Finally, she turned to me and asked, "Did you notice that I did not laugh, Mother?" her thin, strident voice, grated.

"Of course I noticed darling. I didn't think anything of it."

"Do you ever think anything of me at all?" Cecily's eyes now threatened tears.

Oh, for God's sake, I thought, what an utter bore. But, also I was surprised she had the balls to ask the question. "You're here with me aren't you?"

"That's no answer." Her tears fell freely now. "You were pretending to be Diana Mosley, mother, but it wasn't funny to me. You could have just as easily been mocking yourself. That's how you feel about children in general, and me, specifically. You wish I was never born." And so I had one of those split second moments where I could choose honesty or kindness. I had a chance to begin mending our relationship. I guess I waited a split second too long in answering. Cecily had apparently gathered her courage, and she was plowing forward no matter how inconvenient or inappropriate it was to have this discussion in the back of a taxi. Foolish, embarrassing girl.

"Answer me mother. Sometimes you have to look people in the eye and share something of yourself, you owe me that." This inflamed me.

I spoke coldly and deliberately, "Make no mistake, my dear. I owe nothing. I have moved very cleanly through my life, giving as good as I got. As for paying for my actions, I am painfully aware of the exact price of my inattention." She had the good grace to look away then. "I am living that price, an American exile stuck in this

Godforsaken, self-impressed country amid the pompous and the stupid, reduced to singing for our supper to gain social acceptance. Because, Cecily dear, I don't feel comfortable in my home city. You, on the other hand, are free to go where you wish. Tell me Cecily, since we are talking of owing, what exactly were you doing when Christian was running around with Pamela? Did you not notice? Were you too dim to see anything dangerous in it, or were you glad? Glad to see me devastated?"

"You've never been devastated by anything in your life, except perhaps if you missed a manicure. You have to have a heart to be truly devastated."

You know she's wrong I was devastated by losing Christian. Christian and Henry. I truly loved them.

During a hunt weekend, I kept company with fellow American Oona Chaplin (yes do keep up, Charlie's wife). Cecily had decided to remain in London. Oona and I were deep in conversation in a parlor, quietly criticizing the English. That is the common sport of expatriates everywhere, criticizing your host country for not being more like the country you were originally most anxious to leave. This parlor was no different from the five or six I'd been in since arriving in the country. Horrid paintings of horses and hounds brightened the dark paneling, some painted by a real artist, many more by the resident lord or lady with artistic pretensions. Hunting green and burgundy were the colors of preference, and centuries of dust mites bred in every dank corner. I leaned back in an armchair, while Oona perched on the coordinating ottoman.

“I simply can’t get over their nastiness; they’ll say absolutely anything and in the most patronizing way,” Oona complained.

I giggled to myself at this, since Oona herself had acquired the tonality and airs of our hosts in her time abroad. “It’s like television for them,” I replied.

“Television?” she looked at me.

“Yes, instead of turning on the television for hours at a time like we do, they practice the arch remark, the clever aside and the direct comment said with a disarming smile. My guess is it’s a form of relaxation for them. They’ve been indulging in for centuries, perfecting the voice along the way. They are so good at it now, the rest of the world can’t get a decent foothold to put them down. It’s their language, of course; they know more words than we do. It’s hopeless to try and catch up.”

“So what can we do?”

“Build bigger cars and buy their country homes, of course. We’ve not even been at it for a century yet, but I suspect they are starting to get peeved.” Oona laughed.

“We’re fine with your Fords and real estate coups. It’s the damning way you confuse us by calling the ‘bathroom,’ the ‘toilet’ that drives us mad.”

I swung around to see a slim, gray-haired gentleman standing behind dripping in mud from the waist down.

“We are intensely proud, however of never confusing a salon with a stable,” I said keeping an appropriate chill in my voice. One never meets someone new in England with any show of enthusiasm – it’s considered bad form.

“Good for you, Sunny,” my hostess called from the sofa. She stood and walked over to us. “I’ve been trying to impart that information to Roan for years. To no avail, as you can see.” She then gestured formally to me, “Allow me to make the introductions: Mrs. Sunny Marcus, it is with a heavy heart that I introduce Lord Roan Appleby, for he is a blackguard whose muddy boots are cursed by every maid in Leicestershire.” Roan’s grey eyes shone with amusement at this description. “Unfortunately, he is one of the few members of the peerage actually bright enough to increase his inheritance through hard work and ingenuity.”

I took in his pleasant angular face, and the welcoming curve of his mouth. It looked like he had a sense of humor. “How innovative,” I responded.

Roan bowed formally.

“More than that, *really* successful, aren’t you darling? You just got scads of the stuff lying around waiting for the love of a good woman. Which brings me to Sunny, Sunny is a glamorous, American divorcée who made her money like the best of us; she married it.”

“Ahh, a traditionalist.”

I bowed back. “Actually, I made more on the divorce.”

He looked over at Oona, “How’s old Charlie doing, Oona?” He sat down on the arm of my chair, his thigh touching my shoulder.

Oona’s voice became plummier. “He’s a bastard, your Lordship, a complete bastard; if I didn’t have a passel of brats I’d leave him in a minute.”

Roan and I laughed. Oona adored the turf Charlie tramped on and every one of their four children. A man brought over some sherry.

“In fact, that’s the real reason I joined Sunny this weekend. I decided to saddle him with the children for a change.” Oona knocked back her sherry and smacked her lips dramatically. “I’ve discovered what causes them and vowed to stop.”

“You’ve stopped it?” Roan waited, taking a moment to get Oona’s joke. Finally he laughed and replied, “I do believe that’s cause for divorce. Care to speak to that Mrs. Marcus? You are the experienced one here, I gather,” He’s not rude, just British, I repeated to myself and counted to ten.

“Too true,” I replied, “It has been my experience that sex is always at the core of a divorce, either too little with your partner, or too much without.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

You probably guessed the rest. Roan and I had a lovely affair till it became a bore. Soon I found my wander lust returned and New York beckoned. Roan had healed me enough to be able to face the new Mrs. Marcus without bile or distain. No that's a lie, I was able to face her but bile and distain were always present. Still I had to get back to New York. Maybe London wouldn't be my heaven after all, maybe it would be New York. When I think of home I think of New York.

June, 1966

"Kay, I'm having a party, and you're the guest of honor." Truman announced to Katherine Graham, non-swan and publisher of The Washington Post. It was impossible to be a swan and have an outside job according to Truman. To be a true swan one must spend all of one's efforts to that end. I tried to disabuse him of the idea but to no end – a good sound bite was always worth more to him than a boring truth.

"The guest of honor – whatever for?" Truman had her on speaker phone - his latest gadget - for my benefit.

"To cheer you up, of course." Truman chuckled.

"Truman, I don't need cheering up."

"Sure you do, honey, you're awfully depressed." Tru cradled the phone intimately, his mouth touching the receiver like a moony school boy. "Anyway, I'm going to do it, and it will be very big. I've always wanted to give a party in the Plaza ballroom, and it will be in your honor. I've got the next Lady Appleby listening here as

my witness, so you must agree. Otherwise I will be horribly embarrassed. I bragged that I knew you well enough to throw the finest shindig of the year in your honor.”

I lay on the couch in Truman’s United Nations apartment staring at his stuffed parrot. I’d escaped from Lord Roan and was reveling in my return home.

“Sunny, you’re there?” Her voice raised unnecessarily in deference to the speaker phone. How are you? How is Roan? Is the English countryside any more bearable?”

“Absolutely, I’ve discovered the warming effects of sherry,” I said.

“Thank God,” Kay replied.

“Well thank Edmund anyway,” I corrected.

“Edmund?” Kay asked.

“Her English butler,” Truman interjected. “He is dee-vine. He out-Wodehouses Jeeves.”

“Yes, the lovely man saw the whole hunt weekend thing was quite an ordeal for me . . .”

“Though she handled it beautifully,” Truman interrupted. “She had the house, servants and food in ship shape. Best food I’ve eaten in that country, ever. You never do give yourself enough credit honey,” he said to me. “Kay, this woman could manage the White House, the Downing Street residence and still be primped, curled and manicured in time for cocktails.”

I hooted. “Because nothing must interfere with the cocktail hour.”

“Still, what is it about Edmund?” Kay persisted.

“The sherry darling,” I replied, “He replaced that goddamn cat wet served every morning in the tea pot with sherry, and it has made all the difference in the world. Nothing fazes me now, not even a houseful of titled guests with all of their pretensions, but none of their fortunes intact.”

“What has their fortune do with anything?” Kay asked, nosy journalist that she was.

“Well, Sunny’s got to provide them each with servants, at least those who arrive without them. And most of them do now, because they don’t have a pot to pee in,” Truman eagerly explained. He loved the English aristocracy, and its ancient rules. “It’s fascinating,” he continued, “It’s like a whole other country over there. Speaking of urine do you know they pee in the fireplace over there?”

Kay hooted, “And they call us uncivilized.”

“Actually, they call us ‘barbarians,’ but I suppose that’s the same thing,” I interrupted. “When I first arrived, Roan took me to ancestral home of some duke. I made the mistake of sitting rather close to the fireplace – an honest mistake since those goddamn places are two degrees shy of arctic. Anyway, the duke got the urge, shall we say – remember this is England, there is only one real urge there – and whipped out his willy and aimed at the fireplace.”

“Oh my God, what on earth did you do?” Kay asked.

“Well, I moved naturally, not wanting to get caught in the spray and took Roan aside and whispered ‘the duke just went to the bathroom in the fireplace.’”

“What did he say?”

“Oh the patronizing poofter,” I laughed. “He said ‘No dear, not in England. One doesn’t go to the bathroom in England. They pee. And the duke, like many of us enjoys the comfort of a very large fireplace. Beware of open windows too.’”

“Oh Sunny, don’t stay there, it sounds awful. Plus we miss you here. We’re running low on funny women. Are you really going to marry him?”

Kay didn’t pull any punches.

Truman cackled loudly. “Of course she is, she’ll be ‘her ladyship.’”

I think he had an eye to lampoon the peerage in print next with Cecil Beaton and me as his patrons. “No Kay, I don’t think I really can. It’s become painfully clear that I’m just an American girl at heart and no amount of clotted cream is going to change that.”

Tru made a face. He needed new conquests, if I bailed, he’d have to rely on his increasingly strained relationship with Cecil to introduce him around. He was feeling very full of himself. His publication of In Cold Blood, at the beginning of ’66, made lovers of most of his American critics. Now he intended to demand the same adulation from all of society. The Black and White Ball scheduled at the end of ’66 would do that for him. It was a banner year.

Tru purportedly got the color scheme from Dominick Dunne and his wife Lenny. Two years before Truman’s grand fete, he’d attended the Dunne’s Black and White ball for their tenth anniversary. He claims, however, to have been inspired by Cecil Beaton’s Ascot scene in *My Fair Lady*. Whatever the catalyst, it was the classiest bash New York City had seen – not a Champagne fountain in sight. Tru loved the Plaza; it was his

wonderland, a talisman place for him. Before he went to *Voisin, La Côte Basque* and the others, the Plaza was where he lunched - the epitome of refinement.

He would hate the condo plan. Yes, I may be dead, but I'm not oblivious – at least not enough of the time to miss that major real estate coup.

The Ballroom at the Plaza was the last elegant ballroom in New York. I can picture him, a nine-year-old, weird and lonely, sitting in Monroeville, Alabama brainstorming his escape to New York and the quake he would make when he conquered the town.

His motive for the party was to repay his swans for our years of entertaining him; at least that's what he told us. Mostly he wanted to throw the best goddamned party our world had ever seen – to out-Gatsby Gatsby. He wanted every name worth dropping finagling for an invitation.

He got it in spades. I'd like to say he was a bore about it, with his planning and plotting, but it was diverting. His damn little lists. He was like Father fucking Christmas with a naughty and nice list. He came to visit me at the end of July in England. I'd told Roan I was returning to New York for good. For the first time in my life I did the harder thing. I opted out on marriage. Thanks to Wes, I had cash for days so my financial needs were non-existent. After pondering that for a long while, I couldn't figure out what I use a man for. I mean, sex, even for old broads like myself, was never hard to come by (no pun intended). I had a home at the San Remo. Truman was my partner and if society wives were threatened by me then to hell with them. Actually, when the word got out I'd

turned down a title in preference of spinsterhood, I had no shortage of invitations or envious looks for my new found independence.

Truman had most of the larger bits ironed out. The party would be Monday, November 28, 1966 at the Plaza. A *bal masque*. Identities would be a closely guarded secret until the masks were dropped at midnight.

Tru took this party as seriously as any of his books. He threw himself into the planning, anguishing over what to serve, what to drink and how to make it the most sought after invitation that season. The fun of the party was in the editing. He made lists of the world's most influential, celebrated and beautiful, then systematically crossed out the least influential, celebrated and beautiful of that celestial group. He carried his thatch of research papers and lists with him wherever he went - ready to add or delete a person at a moment's notice.

It would be a simple, lovely affair with stringent rules that all must adhere to or risk being ostracized. Guests were not permitted to bring companions of their own choosing. No one would sashay through the ballroom doors that Tru did not know and like. If he'd had a spat with a friend's wife or husband, they were both scraped from the list. Single people were expected to come dateless. I protested this point fiercely.

"No goddamn way I'm showing up to this shindig *sans* an escort." We were lingering atop Tru's bed in my guest suite at the Mayfair house, just two months before the party. I had nearly finished packing up the house for good.

“Oh yes, you are, I won’t have one of your stable boys ruining my carefully orchestrated evening.” I managed to fit in a dalliance with a stable boy before I left Roan’s estate.

“Don’t knock Horace until you try him. He’s a damn sight more appealing than your Mitty men.” I retorted. Considering the low places he trolled for sex I found his criticism rich.

“Oh fuck off, honey. I’m serious. The Mitty men aren’t coming either.”

“Tru-love, see it from my point of view. I’m an old broad, twice- divorced. I can well assure you, I’m not going to make the effort to get all gussied up to make a pitiful entrance all by my lonesome. I must bring a date.”

“Contessa, I will have a hundred extra men, I promise you. They will be delightful.”

“I’m not looking to meet a man you fool. I can do that on my own. I simply want to accessorize with one. I suppose, I could bring Cecily.” We’d formed a truce of sorts. She’d chosen to stay in London and attend design school, while I made my way back to Manhattan. I felt something akin to pride at her independence. Then, again, it may only have been relief at being done with her.

“Cecily, darling?” Truman questioned, skeptically.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, alright, fine, Cecily,” he replied quickly.

“Truman I’m telling you, I won’t come and more importantly, neither will the other single women of a certain age. I promise you.” I was adamant.

Tru thought it over and appeased me. He promised to arrange small dinners before hand; the diners would arrive in groups. I would not have to walk in alone. And when I got in there, the company would be stellar. He was true to his word. Of the 540 people invited, three hundred attended dinner parties beforehand that he'd asked hosts and hostesses to arrange for him. I joined the Paley's, naturally. Her group included Cecil Beaton, Prince and Princess Radziwill, the Agnellis and the Heinzs.

Truman's list had the most diverse group ever committed to a small, spiral-bound notebook: Lords, a lady, two counts, three barons, a marharajah, a maharani, two dukes, many princes and princesses and a partridge in a pear tree. One wag teased, "the guest book reads like an international list for the guillotine."

In Truman's hands the 'list' became a saber with which he could avenge himself on anyone who'd slighted him. Lynda Bird Johnson could come, but her steady George Hamilton could not. Tiffany chairman Walter Hoving, was scratched from the list for not adequately acknowledging the publicity Tru's earlier book had generated.

"When I moved into my new apartment, Tiffany's finally sent me a silver breakfast service. Should have been gold!" He complained peevishly.

The costume and mask creation enslaved all the name designers in New York for months on end. Things got so nutty, a passel of uninvited folk commissioned masks just to keep up appearances. The frenzied clamor for invitations reached its apex when a man told Truman his wife threatened to kill herself if she wasn't invited. He caved and invited her.

“It was like my mother all over again,” He complained to me. “She would have threatened suicide too, and then followed through with it, just to wreck the party. I couldn’t risk this woman was that nutty too.”

Besieged with requests, commands and demands, Truman began to refer to his ball as the “In Bad Blood” party. Journalists later wrote that ‘the invitation, in its way, was a great leveler; the intelligentsia and show-biz folk, Capote’s family and jet-setters, all received the same maddeningly arbitrary treatment.’

Not everyone on his list was burdened with wealth or position. This party was all about Truman; he included his buddies from his beach house, Jack’s friends and relatives and the town folks he’d met while writing In Cold Blood. It took him awhile to figure out the *piece de resistance* – to hold the party in honor of someone. A party by him, for him would not set the right tone and leave him wide open for ridicule in press and privately. He naturally couldn’t ask Babe, Marella, C.Z., Lee or me. We would certainly be miffed if one of us was singled out. We might even choose not to attend his *soirée*. The honored person had to be one people were curious about, underexposed to the media and no threat to his jealous swans.

Kay Graham was a clever choice. She wasn’t over-exposed because she *was* the media, owning both Newsweek and the Post. She wasn’t pretty or stylish; in fact she was, in the manner of Washington women at the time, a conscious frump. Babe introduced them, and Kay became one of his favorites. Her manic-depressive husband’s suicide in 1963 had forced her to take over the reigns of the family business, *her* family business.

Her father had handed it to her husband in the early years. Dramatic and messy families were one of Tru's specialties.

Ever the braggart, Truman inflated the cost of his party to upwards of \$200 000, in interviews, but the actual cost of the party to end all parties was a mere \$16,000 - half of what a New York debut costs. I helped him with the numbers myself.

The real money was spent at the pre-party dinners. Revelers came stoked by the festive preamble. This insured no initial party lull, no waiting for the boys and girls to cross the floor and mingle. People were well-fortified with alcohol and cheer before they exited the elevators on the second floor. The Plaza shimmered with the black, white and red décor he and Babe discussed. The red accent color appeared only on the tables. The baroque gold and white décor of the ballroom provided the perfect backdrop for the starkly-colored clothing. Babe also helped choose the menu, though food was certainly not the focus of the evening. All our eyes were on each other and ourselves in the Plaza mirrors, watching the spectacle we made.

I took Kay's arm after eleven and pulled her away from the receiving line. She looked okay. Her understated white gown was a shade too unflattering. Balmain sewed jet beads around the neck and cuffs of her white wool jersey dress, but did nothing to hide her lumpy figure. Truman's swans would still shine.

Naturally I didn't let her know she could have done so much better. "Well, apparently you can take the Washington out of the girl!" I lied, "That dress is Balmain, if it's anything – where are you hiding the Mainbocher?" Wealthy Washington matrons were devoted to the well-cut, but dowdy suits by the American designer.

She pressed her finger to her lips. “Shhh, I’m in disguise. It’s a masquerade remember? Do I seem cheered yet?” she said

“Well, you seem pretty cheery, so I guess it worked.” Her cheeks were pink with drink and excitement.

She shook her head in amazement. “I was totally baffled, still am. Can you believe this ridiculous to-do over a party?”

“Hmm,” I nodded appreciatively. “I ordered three different dresses, Babe ordered six, Gloria Guinness, God knows, I think she had six different houses in Paris and one in Milan duking it out for the privilege of being showcased.”

“Well no wonder, they obviously knew she would model the crown jewels.”

The ‘Ultimate’ had outdone herself. Two clunky necklaces vied for real estate on her fragile, white neck, one fashioned of rubies and the other of diamonds.

“Yes, she’s already complaining that she’ll have to stay in bed for a week just to recover her balance,” I replied looking around.

Tall stalks of candles were lit in bundles of five. Arrangements of beautiful women circled the room, displaying their charms from all possible vantage points. The scene did compare to Cecil Beaton’s Ascot scene.

“The Plaza was an inspired choice. I’ve always thought this wallpaper looked thick, like brocade.” I murmured.

“Yes, he says he loves this ballroom,” She mused, surveying the sumptuous gold walls. “Truman would’ve given the ball anyway; I’m just part of the props.”

“Prop is a bit harsh,” I replied, “You are a very accomplished woman.”

“Well, he needed a guest of honor. How he came up with me I still can’t imagine.” She raised her shoulders in a shrug worthy of Charles de Gaulle, “Not that I’m complaining. Look at this fantastic setting, look at the glorious masks, who else could have pulled off this fantasy? I’m simply happy to be on the guest list.”

“Yes, you didn’t have to invent a business trip to France,” I replied.

“And then actually go,” we chuckled together. Many people who hadn’t made the final invitation cut, found they were ‘required’ on important business in Europe and the U.K. Of course, after telling their tall tale, they had to make good on it. Many a first class section heading for Europe on the eve of November 28th, was filled with dispossessed folk who’d pissed Truman off at one time or another.

“Truman told me that one man actually called a company-wide meeting of his employees at 5:00 today to tell them, he had been invited to the ball, but had chosen not to go,” Kate repeated, amazed.

“Did you see the two gate crashers?” I asked.

“Only briefly, Truman dealt with them right away. He went straight over when he heard their names announced and said ‘I’m sorry I don’t know you’”

“What did on earth did they say?”

“They just giggled and copped to it. They wanted to come in for five or ten minutes. Can you imagine?”

“Truman must have been tickled.”

“He was thrilled,” Kay nodded.

“Are you two laughing at my expense?” Truman came over and put his arm around my waist.

“With much affection, darling.” I kissed the top of his head. “Everything is beyond. Now dance with me. I noticed you’ve only danced with Kay and the lovely Lauren Bacall.” I fingered his sleeve and looked to the dance floor. Lauren was now doing a fine-footed cha-cha-cha with Jerome Robbins. People stepped back to clear a path and watch them

“Oh honey, I’m really too busy. Kay and I had to dance together. We’re the mom and pop of this operation, and as for Lauren, how many chances does a man have to dance with Lauren Bacall?” he bussed my cheek and made a beeline for Princess Radziwill.

“My, my,” Kay laughed, her eyes searching my face. “He seems to be growing out of his size seven loafers right before our very eyes.”

“Oh, he’s just a busy boy tonight,” I replied.

She just looked at me strangely, her gaze rested on something behind me. I turned to see Truman and the Princess in mid-swing on the dance floor. That bastard, I thought. It seemed I was well below the salt now.

When the Black and White Ball was finally over, it was hailed a triumph as large as In Cold Blood. The infamous guest list was actually published in The New York Times – all 540 names of it, complete with full party coverage. Of course, this was just to out all the last-minute European travelers and folks who loudly stated that they’d declined. Truman could not have been more delighted.

Kay Graham was right about him, though. Truman was officially too big for his boots. And now he had to top himself.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Sunny, wait! Stop!” Babe dashed after me, her two-inch day heels clattered on Fifth. I breakfasted at a café on Museum mile across the park from my apartment. Knowing my routine, she caught me just as I was marching off, clasping Esquire in hand.

I whirled to face her. “That two-bit fucking little shit. That goddamn worm. Did you read this piece of filth?” I shouted. People quickly walked by, their eyes averted, not stopping to inquire why this lunatic in Ferragamos is berating the lovely Mrs. Paley.

“Where are you going?” She breathed heavily, when she reached me.

“To shove his words back where they belong, down his own goddamn throat.” I was so furious I was giving myself a headache. I reached to my forehead and rubbed my temples. “He is nothing but a back-stabbing cunt.”

Babe winced. I knew she loathed that word, but dammit she was too calm and collected for my taste. “Did you even read it?” I shouted.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “This morning, just like you.” Her calmness was affecting me. She had that wonderful ability to smother anxiety with determined complacency. I looked at her more closely. The lovely Mrs. Paley looked disheveled. Not by a normal persons standards of course, but remember, Babe operated at a heavenly zenith few mortals could attain, even now, at nearly sixty years old. Yet, today, her lipstick bled into

the cracks around her mouth, obviously unrefreshed since first application, her nose was shiny and her hair slightly flat on one side. Even with the advent of the cancer that was slowly killing her, she had never appeared so vulnerable.

“You should be in bed,” I replied.

“I had to see you. To find out. . .” She left her sentence unfinished.

“Has Bill seen it?” I choked the words out. *La Côte Basque, 1965* laid out very clearly my relationship with him and his extensive philandering ways.

“No,” Her gloved hands were shaking. “Why are you so angry?” She looked directly into my eyes, but her face was unreadable.

I gritted my teeth, “I am always angry at people I am about to sue.” She put her hand on my forearm.

“Please can we go back to your apartment? I need to ask you something.” Her façade looked close to cracking. Her eyes were glassy with tears. I wondered whether I should just take her back to her apartment. She really didn’t look well. Instead, I nodded, weary, tucking her hand beneath my arm and we hailed a cab to my building. Smiling to my doorman we clicked along the marble foyer to the elevator. The doors met with a whisper. My thoughts were clanging so loudly, I physically shook my head. Babe looked at me strangely. What was I going to say to her? I could only deny. It was the kindest

response. I'd say our little Tru-Love had been overcome by a monumental meanness of spirit enabling him to skewer us before the entire world.

We padded into my apartment. I headed straight for the bar. I didn't give Babe a chance to wave me off. I poured orange juice into my crystal pitcher and doused it with vodka. Carrying a tray over to the ottoman I sat down. She took the highball glass I offered and asked again, "What are you so angry about?"

I snatched my offensive copy of Esquire from the table and read aloud. "'Lady Coolbirth' a 'big breezy peppy broad' in her forties grew up in the west, her latest husband is a rich English knight." I paused, still floored at his audacity. "That is me. I didn't marry Roan, but I might have."

"Yes I suppose it is. And the girl is of course Ann Woodward. Elsie is going to die, after all her efforts, why would he resurrect it now?" Babe shook her head in disbelief, looking to me for an answer.

My phone rang. I ignored it. Elsie Woodward was Ann Woodward's mother-in-law and a pillar of New York society. Babe was right, all of Elsie's efforts to protect the family name and her grandchildren by pretending that Ann had accidentally shot her husband, Elsie's son, were now in vain, thanks to Truman. He'd exposed the murder, Ann's sordid past and her bigamous marriage to the Woodward scion. The phone rang again. I moved to pick it up. Babe placed her hand over the phone to stop me. Her eyes were wide and very dark.

“What I want to know Sunny is who is the man?”

I took a deep breath before responding.

The story begins with Lady Coolbirth, yours truly, being stood up by the Duchess of Windsor for lunch at *La Côte Basque*. Spotting her friend, the gossip writer P.B. Jones, she grabs him to partner her at one of Henri’s sought-after front tables. Lady Coolbirth felt particularly chatty that afternoon, because she expounded on every rarefied patron who passed their table. It was an exemplary afternoon. That group included Babe and Betsy, the Bouvier sisters, Gloria Vanderbilt, Carol Matthau and the comings and goings of two fictitious characters: Ann Hopkins and Sidney Dillon, ‘a conglomerateur’ and ‘advisor to Presidents.’

Sidney was a Jewish millionaire, married to the ‘most beautiful creative alive’ who longed for acceptance in the Wasp stratosphere on whose plane the Racquet Club, Le Jockey, the Everglades, and White’s existed. In pursuit of this goal, Sidney bedded the unappealing, but exceptionally Caucasian former governor’s wife, who, in spite of the fact she ‘looked as though she wore tweed brassieres,’ was a symbol of all he’d never attain. She, the governor’s wife, ‘punished him for his Jewish presumption’ by screwing him during her menses and leaving him with a helluva mess to clean up just hours before his wife was to join him. There could be no mistaking it, Sidney Dillon was Bill Paley.

I gestured for her to sit down and poured our drinks. I tried to keep my face as impassive as possible and shrugged. “Honey, I don’t exactly know who that character’s

supposed to be.” Her eyes narrowed at this answer, so I continued. “I’ve been pretty much focused on how he could use me so badly. But if you want me to guess - I would say it’s Averill Harriman or Jock Whitney.”

Babe shook her head. “Neither Jock nor Averill are Jewish,” she said coldly. I pursed my lips in what I hoped was a thoughtful expression and replied “No, that’s true. Bill is Jewish, but Jock was the Ambassador and Averill is far more politically involved. Perhaps it’s an amalgam,.” I put down my drink and started pacing. “It doesn’t matter, it’s all lies anyway, the little fink, not that anyone will believe us. How could he do this to us?”

“But it’s not all lies,” Babe persisted. “The Ann Woodward stuff is true, almost to the letter, and well, the Governor’s wife is obviously Marie Harriman and you were gonna marry a Brit and well...” her voice trailed off.

I decided to hit her point dead on, “The part you’re worried about, Babe, is a lie.” I lied calmly, “I have never been to bed with your husband and neither has Marie.”

Her eyes searched mine, waiting for me to falter, but I kept my gaze steady. She held my gaze for several seconds, and then dropped hers. Her face reddened.

“No, of course not,” she sounded unconvinced. “I, just, it’s silly really. Rumors always fly about people like us. I’ve heard things . . . cruel things.”

I brazenly continued, unreasonably pleased with my skill at lying with conviction. “Of course you have, we all have, and I just wished I’d paid attention to the rumors with Christian.” Babe looked away, as I had intended. I didn’t mind shamelessly exploiting her guilt over setting up Pammy and Christian when necessary. The phone rang again, this time Babe answered it, glad for the distraction I think.

“Well, well, did you read it? Hmm, what do you think?” Truman mewed into the phone, she told me later. She held the phone away from her ear, looked flabbergasted, and gestured to me. Her face visibly paled. I shook my head at her, indicating she should not tear into him over the phone, so instead, she told him I couldn’t speak to him at the moment.

“Come let’s meet for lunch then, I can’t wait to hear what you two think.”

“Truman would like to meet us for lunch to talk about his story,” she said, her voice tight. I wanted to dive through the telephone wires and pummel both his faces. But I nodded, keeping my voice as normal as possible, loud enough for him to hear over the phone wires, “Sure, tomorrow, how about *La Côte Basque*, say one’sh.”

Babe’s eyes widened and she mouthed, “Are you mad?” I nodded. She relayed the message and hung up.

“I do not want to meet with him,” she protested. “I don’t ever want to see that snake again. Someone will undoubtedly photograph us if we have lunch with him tomorrow. It will look like we endorse this trash.” Thankfully she was finally working up

a head of steam about this. Talking to Truman must have been the kicker - no remorse, only self-aggrandizing arrogance.

“He sounded perfectly normal?” I questioned.

She nodded, sitting back on the sofa and sipping her drink. “Perhaps he thinks us too stupid. He certainly portrayed us as vapid.”

The phone rang again. I answered. This time it was Gloria Vanderbilt. “That fucking, cock-sucking little prick!”

“Hello, Gloria, done your morning reading, I gather,” I tucked the receiver between my chin and shoulder and poured another drink. I sank into the chair opposite Babe, uncertain of what exactly Gloria would rant and how loud, and took a deep breath to steady my nerves.

“I sound like a goddamn idiot,” Gloria seethed, “He portrayed me as a vacuous twit who can’t remember her first husband! I’m going to kill him!” She caught her breath long enough to ask, “Can you believe how he screwed Bill and Babe? Sunny, what will Babe say?”

“Babe is here right now and outraged on my account, since he put all that filth in my mouth. Luckily she got off lightly, no bitchy reference to her,” I responded, turning away from Babe a bit.

Gloria cottoned on quick, “Oh that’s how we’re playing it, are we? Well, okay, fine by me, but you know as well as I do there is only one person Sidney Dillon could be.”

“Yes, I thought of Averell too,” I nodded into the receiver.

“Okay, well whatever, what are we going to do to the little fucker?”

“Lunch,” I replied

“Lunch?”

“Yes, at *La Côte Basque* at 1:00 tomorrow. Okay?”

“What have you got planned?” her voice was low and conspiratorial.

“Right now, murder by castration, but I’m still working on it. Just be there.” I clicked down the receiver and grabbed my address book. Babe was still sitting on the sofa, looking straight ahead. She would be of no use with the plotting. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, but anything was better than feeling powerless. The phone kept on ringing, mostly it was other swans wanting to commiserate or gauge how pissed off Babe and I were. Gloria Guinness had taken to her bed stricken on our behalf. Marella was meeting us at the restaurant and Carole Matthau called to say that Elsie Woodward, Ann’s mother-in-law, was devastated. It was like losing her son all over again.

“We have to humiliate him,” I finally said aloud to Babe. “Publicly, like he did us.”

“I will not stoop to his level. I just don’t ever want to see him again. Can you imagine Elsie right now? She is the imprint of good breeding. Truman barely even knows her. Didn’t he think his venom would infect others too?”

“I don’t suppose he cared. He certainly laid the murder and murderer out fairly clearly - using my mouth to do it too.” My anger flared again. Somehow at lunch we would surround him, turn on him, humble him right in *La Côte Basque*, right before Henri and the world he tried to conquer.

There were six of us in total: Babe, Marella, Gloria Vanderbilt, Carole, Gloria Guinness and me. My plan was still fuzzy; the complication was not what to say. We all came prepared with an earful of bile to dump. The complication was how to retain our dignity while doing it. This was Babe’s caveat. She really wanted no part of it, but I bullied her into being there. Our revenge would have no teeth if the swan he most cared about was absent.

We arrived fifteen minutes earlier than the appointed time and had Henri sit us prominently. We circled the large table, leaving one seat conspicuously empty. Babe had Henri distance our place settings farther away than normal from where Truman would sit, so he would feel his otherness as soon as he sat down. We would take turns, starting with Babe, whose heart hurt so much, I knew her words would be the softest, and ending with

me. I rehearsed my attack in bed as soon as I awoke, then in the mirror while washing my face and even in the cab ride over to the restaurant. For once I acted crazier than a New York cabbie. We would show him what angry beasts swans could be. He would pay. After today, we would drop him like last season's nail varnish. *La Côte Basque, 1965* was nothing compared to *La Côte Basque, 1975*.

We may be older - I was sixty by this point - but every woman in our group was still stunning. A hush fell over the restaurant when we claimed our table. Ever the stylist, Babe had decided we would all wear white, though it was January. A visual statement of our innocence, I believe was the intention. The sommelier had the Haut-Brion breathing, and Henri poured for us. We sat wordlessly, waiting. Truman swept in; a tiny impresario greeting every table with kisses and laughs before he reached ours. He stepped back in mock alarm. Pretending to shield his eyes from our combined beauty, he flitted to his chair and gripped the back of it.

"Ladies, ladies, my goodness me, what a delightful surprise. This is wonderful! I do so hope you read my little piece in Esquire, I am dying to hear what you all think." Then he paused for a minute, noticing our clothing. "White, in January?" He looked puzzled. "Theme dressing, darlings?" When none of us spoke right away, he called to Henri, "I'm desperate for a little juice Henri."

"Well, well, what a morning I have had. All in all, I do believe it is a great success. Already some of the newsstands are sold out! Can you believe it? And Esquire is definitely crediting my little story as the impetus. Thank goodness for central heating; it

is freezing outside.” Truman surveyed our stony faces and quipped, his eyes uncertain, “It seems a little frosty in here too now that I think about it.” He looked directly at Babe who sat to his left, I flanked his right. “Now, really, loveys what’s the deal with the white? A metaphor perhaps?”

Babe inhaled audibly, and seemed about to speak, when Henri rushed over to her and whispered something in her ear. She gasped, visibly shaken. She whispered to Gloria Vanderbilt on her left, and stood and walked out without saying another word. Gloria, looking equally shocked, also stood, bent to whisper to Carole, and then abruptly left too. So it went, around the table, each woman leaving without saying a word to Truman, only whispering to the person next to them. Truman, perplexed kept repeating “What, what, for God’s sake, what’s going on?” Only to be ignored by those who once tittered at his every word.

Finally, Gloria Guinness turned to me, whispered, stood, patted my shoulder and left. I took a deep breath and stood too. I did not look at Truman. I opened my pocket book and withdrew a crisp, new hundred dollar bill, so like the one my mother had tucked under my pillow for my grand adventure all those years ago. I dropped the bill on his plate.

“Your services are no longer required, Truman,” my voice was harsh with anger. “Earlier this morning Elsie Woodward discovered the body of her daughter-in-law Ann in her bathroom. An apparent suicide. The current issue of Esquire lay beside her body.”

I gestured to the money, "Consider it severance." I nodded to Henri and left.

Chapter Thirty

That's it. That's where the story should end. Cleanly. Definitively. But no, on Earth as in Hell the Devil is in the details, the dangling past participles, the untucked shirts, the ragged, unfinished, frayed threads.

Things deteriorated for Tru and me. He published the other three Answered Prayers stories to much fanfare. None were as damning as the original – at least not to his former swans, and that's all we cared about. I took to drinking more – which considering how much I drank already was awe-inspiring.

He took to roaming with a “B” crowd that slung itself tightly around Andy Warhol. Warhol had courted Tru for years. Andy would write him little notes decorated with watercolor butterflies and angels. These *billet doux* shared simple sentiments like “Happy Monday,” “Happy Tuesday,” etc. He'd actually drop them off at Truman's mother's home when she was still alive, and wait outside the building, hoping to meet Tru. *Trés bizarre*. When Tru-love was still sane, he was understandably disturbed by this. Who wouldn't be? I watched from the sidelines, telling myself I wasn't interested, but, of course, I was.

Eventually they became friends. Truth be told, Truman mocked Andy until we deserted him. After “*La Côte Basque*” Tru embraced him. He even wrote for Andy's publication, Interview. The last decent writing he did, really, ten of the pieces ended up in his book Music for Chameleons – not that I paid close attention. I spied him the few

times I was taken to Studio 54, a shabby former theatre on West Fifty-Fourth Street. Studio 54, ugh, crass and ghastly, yet the Times labeled it the Oz of discos. Studio 54 had the distinction of being the place everybody who was anybody, and anybody who wanted to be somebody or at least see one up close, went. The place achieved serious cache when Bianca Jagger celebrated her birthday there astride a white horse, led around by a black man swathed in body glitter and nothing else. In the olden days it would have been a lark for Truman at first. But he would have tired of it. The Truman I knew lived for the veiled, the beautiful as well as the odd and quirky. The new crazy Truman however was smitten with the dump. He, who used to be so enamored of beauty loved 54, a place where beautiful people congregated to be ugly. I didn't understand the appeal. Still don't. Apparently he'd show up there two or three nights a week, dragging one of his non-descript Mitty-men with him for company.

The night I was there, I watched him on the dance floor jitterbugging sloppily with the editor of Interview, Bob Colacello. Bob, a habitué of 54 sat down with me later, well within view of Truman. "Not going to dance?" he questioned, swaying to the music.

"It would be a shame to dance away all this complimentary alcohol." I leaned back against the banquette.

"I could teach you how to disco," he butted his cigarette and reached for my hand.

"Perhaps I already know how," I was still current at sixty-one.

“Then let’s.” We slid out of the banquette, still holding hands, and he marched me to the edge of the dance floor.

“Is Truman your protégé?” I shouted over the din.

Bob laughed, “Some God-given abilities shouldn’t be interfered with.”

I laughed, “And some should.” I nodded to the buff young waiter for another round. They were all fey, but lovely. They walked around in what looked like little more than diapers. The whole effect was rather poor-boy Dionysian *sans* any cloven hooves – at least, that I could detect. We watched the dancers gyrate.

“So how long are you going to be pissed at him?” Bob shouted after a while.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to the dancers. “I’m not angry with him Bob. I’m simply done with him. There is a difference.”

“You know Truman always whistles while he dances,” he changed the subject.

“But never to the song you’re dancing to,” I finished. Several of the women and a few of the men were removing their tops in time with the rhythm.

“Exactly. Just now, while we were dancing to Donna Summer’s ‘Enough is enough’ he was whistling ‘Whistle While You Work.’ It threw me off. You know, Disney and all.”

“Could it have been the alcohol?” I asked.

“Dance with me. I want to dance with a Swa,” he commanded. I allowed myself to be led from the edge onto the dance floor. And by the way, I could disco dance. While I didn’t exactly possess a dancer’s body anymore, I still had the skills. We put on quite a show.

If it’s possible to cringe without a face I am cringing now. Why didn’t I simply stay home and be dignified or return to embroidery? Why was I still drawn to him, even then after everything? I hated him. I hate him now.

Truman applauded loudly, leading others to do the same, and called out “See Countess, *Cinquataquattro* (his pet name for Studio 54) is the Stork Club with less clothing.” I did not respond.

Bob lead me back to my vodka. “Truman is like Moses here,” he said, sliding into the banquette beside me. “When he arrives, the thickest crowds’ part for him, when he claps, they all follow.”

“How impressive,” I mocked. “Truman’s very entertaining.” We lolled on the banquette for a time with the rest of my crowd and gazed at the glittery children play. A young woman walked by, something in the way she swayed her hips reminded me of Lana Turner at the Stork Club, on her way to the Cub room.

“Bob, this isn’t the VIP lounge?”

“The sanctum sanctorum? No, Swanny, it changes. There are storage cages downstairs under the dance floor.”

“Cages?”

He laughed and nodded, “By the boiler. Come with me.” He held my hand. We walked across the dance floor to downstairs. I think he hoped to shock me. My current companion, Max, came along for the visit, though he’d been there countless times. Sure enough, we came to an actual cage that was the designated lounge for the evening. It was hideous. Cushions and mattresses crushed on the cement floor. Dingy, but everyone was there. Fashion people – La Vreeland holding court, her newest acolytes, Penelope Tree and Marisa Berenson sitting close by. They were the latter-day debts, we now call models. There were also film and rock stars. You know their names. And there were the drugs, of course, so many drugs - not that Diana was imbibing – her worldview was psychedelic enough without chemical intervention. Still, she knew where to be.

I pulled up a mattress beside Diana, asked Bob to grab me vodka and joined in the conversation. Now, at least, I could see what Tru found compelling – the sub-culture. Bob came back with my drink and told us the latest tale of Steve Rubell, co-owner of the Studio; still, I think, hoping to glean a reaction other than benign acceptance from me.

“Steve came down here one morning, early, really early, after he thought everyone had left and spotted a Euro trash princess handcuffed to an overhead pipe. She’d been escorted there at her own behest, handcuffed, fucked by one of the cocktail

waiters and then abandoned. Apparently the waiter, diligent worker that he was, hurried back to complete his shift, forgetting all about the handcuffs.”

“How extraordinary!” Diana exclaimed, over the responsive audience. “What a startling exhibit that would be.” She laughed. We all just looked at her, trying to picture what Bob described, showcased at the Metropolitan Museum, where she now worked. I winked at Bob, and tilted my head to indicate I was going. He stayed behind. I passed a number of sexual positions on my way out and shook my head. I wasn’t even amused anymore. Just tired. Perhaps I wasn’t drunk enough. I made my way upstairs then stopped to rub my eyes - the throbbing lights had a blistering effect. Truman stood in the doorwell, looking down on me.

“Couldn’t keep away from me Contessa? Really there’s no need to stalk, I forgive you.”

I pretended not to hear him.

“Or perhaps you came for the ambiance. This is the nightclub of the future you know. Very democratic. Boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, blacks and whites, capitalists and Marxists, Chinese and everything else-all one big mix!” In the corner of my eye I spied him. He preened as if this were his private party.

I looked up, there were about seven people clutched between us on the stairs. I tried to push past a braless adolescent pressing her pointy nipples on each passer-by.

“Delicious,” he continued, eyeing the Lolita, “Isn’t it too bad that Proust didn’t have something like this? Sometimes when I’m sitting up there -” He pointed to the deejay’s booth above the dance floor, “I think about all the dead people who would have loved this. It’s a shame they’re not around – people like Toulouse-Lautrec or Baudelaire or Oscar Wilde. Cole [Porter] would have loved this. What do you think Babe would say?”

My head turned and I looked him directly in the eye, for the first time in ages. I spoke quietly, tiredness etched in every syllable. “I’ll tell you what Babe wouldn’t say. She wouldn’t say ‘once again you’ve confused seamy with sophisticated.’ She’d just think it, then she’d look away, ashamed and embarrassed for you and for what you’ve become.” What we’ve become I did not add. I thrust past the sweat-slick bodies, desperate to get away. Truman grabbed at my arm as I reached the top step.

I looked down at him; his eyes were bleary with unshed tears.

“You know I tried to call her before she died. I just wanted to explain. To tell her my side. Bill wouldn’t even pass a message to her, much less the receiver. I just wanted to say goodbye. I loved her you know. She was my best friend.”

I removed his hand from my forearm one finger at a time and left.

I popped back to Studio 54 a year later, God knows why; the whole thing was in terrible taste. But then lots of people have terrible taste and make a damn good living off of it. Truman was there *naturelement*, quite slender now, slumped on a banquette by the dance floor. His white hat slouched low on his brow, shielding his eyes from the chaotic whirl before him I guess. I had heard about the new hair plugs he put in as part of his latest makeover, but unfortunately could not make them out because of that damn hat. Before him sat his “orange drink,” vodka and freshly squeezed orange juice. Gloria Swanson nestled on one side, leaving room for Kate Harrington, the lovely child of John O’Shea, Truman’s former Mitty man, on the other. Gloria and Kate were chatting, Kate leaning into Truman’s chest. Seemingly oblivious, he ignored the women and their gossip. Ignored them. Poor darling, he looked bored. Truman of all people, who, like Vreeland, believed only the boring were bored. He looked up at me as I passed, his eyes blank, unseeing or perhaps, uncaring. I made my way to the omnipresent Bob Colacello. Coked up in a corner, he waved as I approached.

“Hey Swanny, looking for a dance partner?” Bob slid over to make room for me at his table, gesturing for me to help myself to the coke.

“That’s Lady Swanny to you Mr. Colacello. What’s with your esteemed Moses?” I rummaged through my handbag for cigarettes.

“What, now you care, when the job is nearly done?” Bob’s voice was shrill and quick.

“The job is nearly done?” I repeated, sweeping the powder off the table.

“What the fuck!” he scrambled under the table to wipe up the powder. “You fucked him up, but good.”

“We both know what’s doing the job, Bob, and it sure as hell isn’t me.”

“He still hasn’t delivered, you know,” he replied. The words fired from his mouth. His head popped back up from under the table. Sweat lit his forehead. He crawled back in his seat.

“What?” Stoned conversations were usually my specialty, but tonight I gave a damn about the answer so I didn’t want to riddle it out of him.

“Bob, what hasn’t he delivered? A book?”

“Nice. The book. Swanny, come on lets dance,” he snapped up and grabbed my hand. I shook him off and stood.

“I don’t want to dance. What book?” I signaled to the nearest diapered server to bring refreshments, but remained standing. Remember that long ago promise I made to myself about confrontations? Not only did I have on spike heeled boots, but I stood tall in them – towering, in fact, over Bob. Bob pushed himself up on the table top and sat there, legs dangling.

“Look lady, I love you. I think you’re gorgeous, even now, but you’re a little long in the tooth to play the ingénue, know what I mean? The book you and your friends

fucked up for him, ya know. You freaked out remember?” His staccato line-delivery pulsed with the music.

“*La Côte Basque* you mean?”

“Cute, *La Côte Basque* was the story that concerned you, but the book was to be about all of it, the whole deal, society *a la* Proust baby!”

“I always thought it was embarrassingly naïve of Truman to promise a book of Proustian proportions - not even naïve really - just embarrassing. Tempts the Gods to smite, you know.”

“Well the Goddesses did,” he replied. A waiter handed me my drink. I tasted the gin with my tongue first. Sweet Tanqueray. It would do.

“He just published *Music for the Chameleons* Bob. I don’t think anything is fucked up at all. He just doesn’t have a story about us, only gossip and now that he’s cut off, he has no more gossip.” I looked at him and shook my head. He is a tiny, little man. “It’s seems he’s painted himself to be quite a victim. He hunted us, Bob. He’s one hell of a researcher and he hunted us. We were all just too blind to see it.” I ground my cigarette beneath my heel, readying to leave.

“He was your friend,” Bob shouted again.

“No, he was a writer without material. A tremendous craftsman without imagination, it seems.”

“Give me a break Swanny, he’s a genius.”

“Now there’s a term that’s bandied about too generously. He approached us as he did the people in *In Cold Blood*, a calculating newshound, only we were too dumb to realize it. Ours is a closed society, yet he wheedled his way in carefully, taking notes all the while, until he was fully entrenched. Purporting to love some of us. Yet, he still weighed in with his indictment. Not even in book form – he couldn’t wait to get it out – he published it in bits and pieces – as if we were all so trivial.” I gulped my gin, feeling flushed, not ready to abandon my rant. I took a deep breath and began again.

“So Answered Prayers is not finished?”

“He says it almost is. Lots of people have seen hundreds of pages. Some hot story on Jerry Zipkin called “A Severe Insult to the Brain.” And of course some more stuff on you, Swanny. You’re a double-gater I hear.”

“I beg your pardon? A what?”

“A double-gater, you know, someone who swings both ways. Very mod for an old broad, no offense. Come on, haven’t you followed it in the paper?”

“I’m a double-gater? That’s in the paper?” I sputtered.

Bob shook his head vigorously, “Nahh, at least not yet. Just the stuff about how he pretty much has to publish it. Poor Truman says he’s going to have to finish it just for

the cash if Gore's lawsuit sticks, especially since that bitch Lee turned on him. You must have heard that. She's one of you broads."

It was very warm in the Studio all of a sudden. I couldn't believe Truman was going to dredge up my one and only, foray into gay sex for public consumption. Would anyone even give a damn? After all, this was the seventies and homosexuality was becoming fashionable. Maybe that would be his point. Either way, I gave a damn. I didn't want to be one of his stock characters anymore.

To Bob I replied coolly, "As fascinating as Mr. Capote is, I have managed to patch my life together piecemeal without his presence. I now can go whole years without reading, talking or even thinking about him. And by the by, I am far more careful of the company I keep than I used to be. Lee Radziwill is certainly not one of us broads." I said this rather grandly. When one lies it is always best to be grand and garish about it.

I followed the Gore-Truman feud with more relish than I read a cocktail menu. Gore's libel suit had been kicking around for about three years. Truman, you'll remember indiscreetly (*quelle surprise*) told Playgirl magazine that Gore had been kicked out of the Kennedy house. Lee Radziwill had supposedly been his source. Since he and Lee were such good buddies, he naturally expected that she would 'fess up if the thing came to court and confirm his story. Well, lovely Lee turned out to have a backbone as sturdy as a chicken bone. In spring of 1979, when the time came to testify, Lee turned coat on Truman and chose to be a witness for the prosecution. According to the Times her exact

words to Gore's lawyer were, "I do not recall ever discussing with Truman Capote the incident or the evening, which I understand is the subject of this lawsuit."

Bob continued on his drunken tirade. "Well, Truman sure hates her now, called her a witless cunt. You know, she never even gave him a head's up. Just let him get nailed. Some friend. Never trust a woman, I tell you, especially a rich one. He was just blindsided."

"It's terrible when one's close friend betrays you so publicly."

Bob ignored my comment and continued with his meandering discourse. "From what I understand there's more to come. He's been talking to Clay Felker, the new guy at Esquire. Says he's got the last chapter to sell. Wants \$35,000 for it. Claims he's got 30,000 words. Felker agreed, but said he wanted to read it first. Tru's never been able to get it to him."

"30,000 words on Zipkin and I. . ." Zipkin was a dear, dear friend. One I'd confided in. He's what we used to call a "walker," a somewhat pejorative reference to a man who escorts well-known society women in the place of their husbands to parties and events. Woman's Wear Daily coined the phrase to intimate the effete or effeminate who engaged in social escorting. Yet Jerry was delicious - outrageously outspoken, as all those boys can be - committed to entertaining. A social gadfly certainly, but for the climbers we'd all be bored to tears. No wonder Truman targeted him. Jerry was, after all,

an *arriviste* modeled after Capote himself. Why didn't he focus his energy on revenging himself against Lee and leave the rest of us alone finally?

I put down my drink and left Bob in mid-sentence. I doubt he even noticed. I walked over to my companions and told them I was leaving. I had assumed Tru would leave us alone. Society had changed anyway, at least the society he originally thought to write of. He had changed it. Or perhaps he simply perceived the change earlier and hallmarked it in black and white when he'd mixed the old guard with Hollywood people, tossed in the ordinary folks from In Cold Blood, who had no more claim to fame than a waitress. We'd revealed enough. Everyone had talked *enough*. We'd all been tainted by the proletariat poring over our lives, so tainted in fact, that some of us now not only desired it, we required it. Many now longed for the attention like common showgirls.

The cabbie pulled up to my apartment and I hurried inside. I did not tarry long, a plan was forming in my mind as cockeyed as my pilgrimage to Harry Winston's. Quickly I changed into a black turtleneck, trousers and a beige trench coat. I ransacked my closet for a black leather satchel to complete the look. Feeling deliciously Mata Hari I wrestled with the notion of black sunglasses to match. However, since my activities were to be nocturnal I thought better of it.

It will be shown by fashion historians a century from now that the Beatniks made a far greater contribution to 20th century style than any designer. There is no one who does not look chicer and more interesting in a black turtleneck. Even in my sixties I looked quite fetching in it.

Getting into Truman's apartment itself was easy enough. His doorman recognized me, though it had been a few years. The United Nations Plaza was graced with a grand, contemporary lobby, impressive, even now. I told Hank, the doorman, that Mr. Capote had forgotten his *medication*, and he needed me to retrieve it. Hank nodded knowingly and unlocked the door.

Once in the apartment I searched his desk first, a rickety garage-sale find from some years back. Sifting through the crowd of papers crunched between his books and highball glasses, I discovered some coins, three decks of cigarettes and a cluster of reviews for Music for the Chameleons. Not one page of his Zipkin piece anywhere. The apartment was relatively tidy, but smelled faintly of dirty socks and stale air. I went into his bedroom. Truman usually wrote in bed in the mornings, handwriting page after page for three or four hours at a time. The bed was unmade but innocent of papers. His night table held only two books, In Cold Blood and Other Voices, Other Rooms. I searched drawers and cupboards, suitcases and bags. Not a sentence of the damning stories to be found. I looked at my watch. It was 1:00 p.m. I didn't know what Truman's schedule was like these days, but I doubted he'd be much longer. I didn't bother tidying after my investigation. He wouldn't be sober enough to notice. After I'd completed a thorough once-over of the apartment with no luck, I closed the door and sought out Hank again.

"Did you find everything you needed Mrs. Marcus?" He inquired when I reached his booth.

“No Hank,” I said, placing my hand on his forearm and squeezing. “And I’m getting rather worried about Mr. Capote. Could there be another place he would keep his medication? He must be getting rather low on it right now. He told me his desk, but, well, I can trust you Hank; he was a little inebriated. I have to get back to him quickly.” I affected a strained, worried face.

Hank nodded like a good little doll-baby. “Well, perhaps, Mr. Capote meant his locker. He does most of his writing in there.” I nodded to him impatiently. “Let me take you there right now.”

“Thank you so much, Hank, you’re exactly right now that I think of it. He said his medication was on his desk, I obviously inferred the wrong desk. Thank goodness one of us is thinking clearly.” We took the elevator to the floor with all the lockers. Keying the door, he asked me if I wanted him to wait.

“No, thank you so much. I don’t want to hold you up. I won’t be but a minute.”

I flicked the switch on the side of the wall. A bald overhead bulb lit up the little cubby space. A sickly-sweet smell confounded me until I spied a decaying bunch of roses in high on a shelf. How could he write in here? I wondered. The space was cramped and crammed with corrugated cardboard boxes and paste beads. The cinderblock walls were painted yellow, obviously an attempt to make the place feel less desperate. Books and newspapers were confettied on the floor. A small book case cradled his writing books: four dictionaries; two thesauruses; an Atlas; and three encyclopedias. I felt safer here,

safe enough to take my time. It seemed unlikely that Truman would return home in the little hours of the morning and come down to his locker. A tower of Plexiglas boxes were stacked in the corner. Turning to the table that acted as his desk I saw another messy mix of papers and pads. Grabbing the pads first I began to read:

Many women of a certain age chose a determinedly single life. They keep company with woman 'companions,' some even going so far as to hire them. However, Lady Ina Coolbirth was never one to limit her options. She didn't care for euphemisms or euphemistic behavior. Even so, she was what we called a double-gater...

Furious, I stopped reading there. Pathetic bastard, he must really be scrambling for material. Desperation was making him dangerous and mean. I gathered up every scrap of handwritten paper I could find, not bothering to read anymore. Stuffing them into my satchel I fastened the clip and began tidying his space. I wanted there to be no mistake that I'd been here, that I'd taken his work. I was so angry I wanted him to come at me publicly. I'd give him a battle the likes of which he'd never seen before. He'd remember Gore fondly, compared to me. I'd embarrass him, expose him for the gossip mongering hack he was, or I'd deny there were any papers at all. I'd tell the world he'd been lying, that he'd written nothing. Pulling all his volumes from the shelves, I stacked them in neat, artistic piles around the floor. Just like the tidy groupings he'd often admired at my apartment and tried to emulate. That completed, I picked up my bag and closed the locker. I nodded at Hank as I tossed the key on his desk. He hurried out to hail a cab for

me. On the ride home I composed my thoughts, figuring out what killing things I'd say when Truman confronted me.

Chapter Thirty-one

A familiar knock sounded on the door. A code knock to the beat of “Shave and a haircut, two bits.” Truman, I thought. Three years later than I expected. Had he heard I was dying? Did he come to gloat, or had he just finally figured it out?

“Who’s there?” I called out, my voice hoarse from a morning of silence. Marta my maid didn’t come everyday now. She was semi-retired and I was virtually immobile and therefore tidier. I heard my front door wheeze open slowly. I never remembered to lock it. I paid a fortune in building fees for security – a chain lock seemed redundant.

“It’s me Contessa,” he called, “I come bearing a gift.” He shuffled along the corridor and came into view. Truman - a much, much older Truman than I remember. The last time I saw him at the ‘Studio,’ the night I stole from him, he’d dieted to one third of himself and had the excess flaps trimmed by a plastic surgeon. Now he’d reclaimed his other two thirds and the edges of his facelift were blurry. He walked over to me – I don’t stand anymore - and leaned in to kiss my nose. I rarely offer up my lips to anyone, certainly never anyone younger than I. I knew I’d aged horribly in the past few months. I have visions from my youth of withered crones reaching with cracked lips to kiss my young mouth. I considered it vile at the time, and still do. I remember an ancient aunt of Wesley’s kissing Cecily. I turned away as she placed her age-hardened mouth on Cecily’s

fresh pink lips, certain that when I turned back, Cecily's youth would be sucked clean out of her. I never want anyone to have such fancies about me.

But I don't encounter youth much these days. Cecily shows up now and then, I suspect just to update the inventory of items in the apartment. She has a little boy; she showed me a picture of him once. Beauty skips a generation I suppose, for he is lovely - dark, thick hair, like his Grandfather and big blue eyes. His cheeks are full as Henry's were. I would have liked to meet him. I asked her to bring him with her the next time. She didn't have to tell him who I was. He could call me Contessa or Sunny or whatever he wished. But she refused. She'd finally done something to interest me and she didn't care enough to show me.

"You're not really good with children, Sunny," she had said, her voice tight and sanctimonious. I'd asked her to call me Sunny, because in her mouth the word 'Mother' always came out as an accusation.

I only nodded.

"I mean really, Mother," she was on a roll now, "Look how you treated me, or didn't treat me. I would never subject little Christian to that. He means the world to me and he knows it, too." Yes, she named him Christian - my daughter - a psychiatric gold mine.

I breathed deeply; I knew there was more to come. "That's the way it should be Mother, that's what healthy parenting is. You'll never know the joy of having a sweet,

tender hug from my little boy. I gave you so many chances, but you tossed them away, tossed me away.” She was in full-blown form now; her therapist will be so pleased. It is for people like her they have purgatory. Neither God nor Satan need any being that wanting and whiny in their realm.

I stared stonily at her forehead. Sometimes I liked to pretend I was comatose when she was raging, see if I could fool her into believing her words had sent me over the edge.

“Well, now it’s too late. I’m glad you want to see him, but this photograph is as close as you’re ever going to get.”

She was so angry, so very angry. It exhausted me, sadness tugged at my bottom lip. I was not that bad of a mother. She was never beaten. She was fed, clothed and schooled. I paid for everything, including the therapy that was now indicting me. I would’ve liked to meet the little boy named Christian. But I was too old and too tired to beg anyone for anything.

Truman coughed. I’d forgotten about him. I looked him over. No more diffident prom date. The boy with the uneven bangs now looked like a debauched, bloated gnome. Unfair erosion of flesh and dignity – he and I, so delighted with our beauty, were now the gruesome crones found in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

“Aren’t we two a picture?” I smiled ruefully.

Tru nodded. “The kind you send to an old lover and say, ‘it’s a good thing you left, or look what you would have ended up with.’”

“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” I motioned for him to sit with me in the living room, treating him as if I’d been expecting him – which, in a way, I had, for years.

He sat down where I indicated. He took what looked like a cursory glance at the room, but of course, for a writer, there is no such thing.

“What are you doing here Truman? Did you want the chance to tower over me for once in your life?” I spoke softly, referring to my wheelchair state.

He laughed, “Silly Contessa,” then turned to my book piles. “Everything looks pretty much the same. Perhaps the titles have changed, but not the arrangements.” He patted the top of one of my book stacks. Long ago I’d abandoned all desire for a ‘decorated’ living space and piled my books where I could easily reach them. Inspired by Hemingway’s home, I suppose. My bookshelves were overflowing. The books I was currently involved with were all within arms reach, functioning as end tables, and foot stools. They were my consolation for being alone and less pungent than cats.

“Do you know I once hired my former friend Princess Radziwill to reproduce your artful arrangements in my apartment? I figured it was becoming of an author to have piles of books around. But alas, she may be a talented decorator, but has none of your chic. You can’t mimic chic. No matter how she placed them, it always look affected and

nouveau. You've managed to combine the atmosphere of a French chateau's library with Atticus Finch's study. *Trés jolie.*"

"Thank you. It never fails to please me either." It was easy to get caught up in talking with him again. Part of me wanted to demand he cut the crap, but most of me just wanted to have a cozy chat. "I suspect true chic is the absence of desire," I continued.

"I don't know. By that measure Babe would be the least chic person ever, she cared so much about it." Babe was always his gauge of perfection. The unanswerable response to any question of style. Compared to Babe I would always be second rate. She even had the benefit of dying relatively young.

"Do you think she could have kept it up? Dealt with the horrible assault on the body. Can you see her in Depends?" I giggled. Potty humor never stops being funny.

"Absolutely, only they would be designed by Hermes and coordinate effortlessly with her handbag and pumps," he cackled, and then nodded soberly, "Wise woman, best to bail when she did."

Truman stood and walked over to my turntable. It was the one I'd purchased with him in the sixties, the kind that looked like a carved wood sideboard. You had to finger the ledge to locate the fastener and release the lid from the catch. He may enjoy dancing to disco, but he would not find the Bee Gees among my records. He selected Mancini's *Breakfast at Tiffanys* LP, and then bitchily asked, "So did you comfort Bill in his hours of need after Babe died?"

“We comforted each other. No sex by that point, though I wouldn’t have minded. He was devastated, completely undone, I was amazed. We all were. He stopped functioning for a long time. We drifted apart after that. Babe was our connection and after she died, we both lost interest.” I wheeled my chair closer to him. “You said you had a present for me.”

“Yes, to show you I forgive you.” He looked down and tugged on his shirtsleeves.

I stared at him, not taking the bait.

He raised his head slowly, prompting me. “For abandoning me, turning Babe against me, Gloria, all of them. For being a hypocrite.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind, my sweet?” The old anger flared up again, familiar, like an old friend, and then dissipated. To my dismay I had a coughing jag. The first one he’d witnessed. He came over, alarmed. I waved him away, embarrassed. I managed to croak, “Light me a cigarette will you darling.”

He looked doubtful, eyed the oxygen tank nearby, but obliged.

“My present,” I commanded having recovered sufficiently to speak with a semblance of grace. He nodded and went to the foyer to retrieve it. It was loosely wrapped in red tissue. He placed it on my lap and stood by uneasily. “Oh do get us a drink, Tru-love. I’m a terrible hostess; I completely forgot to organize cocktails.”

“It’s stuffy in here; I’m going to open a window. Where’s Marta?” He’d always been kind to my day maid.

“Visiting her daughter in Queens – she only works part-time now. I can’t stand the idea of two feeble old broads watching each other age.”

“A little juice, Contessa?” he offered. I nodded.

“Yes please, a little juice is just what the doctor should have ordered had he not been such a prig.” I unwrapped my present. Beneath the paper was a Plexiglas box, slightly larger than a tissue box, like I’d seen in his locker. Inside, was another box crusted with paste gems as yellow as my sunshine ring and jet beads. Scrawled on the side were bits of poems and phrases I’d overused. Newspaper clippings were shellacked to the bottom. I understood why he was here now. It was as clear as the jet beads, the beads one wears for funerals. The Plexiglas was sealed and signed by Truman on the bottom. I started to pry it open when he returned with my vodka and juice. He handed me my juice and took the box from my lap.

“More for later,” he said placing the box behind him.

“Give it back.” I demanded, “What the hell is it?”

“A snakebite kit. My creative outlet,” he laughed. “I make them for all my good friends when I’m locked away in my studio, instead of writing.”

“You made it?”

“Yes, I got the idea in Georgia. I was lecturing there and someone took me to the Army base. I noticed these little cardboard boxes that contained instructions and paraphernalia for treating snakebite. Look on the side you can still see it . . .”

He held the box up for me to see, sure enough encircled by paste stones was a snake image. I nodded.

“I swiped as many as I could from the base, then contacted the manufacturer and he sent me some more, plus a pile of the little corrugated cardboard boxes that I could fold to my purposes.”

“You’ve gone completely mad, darling. What is the point?” What was the point of his visit?

“I make them for my friends, to protect me from them - a counter-curse. So many people I’ve loved and trusted turned on me, horribly, publicly. I feel I need protection. If every person I love has one of these, I shall always have an antidote close at hand should they transform into snakes.”

“Hmm. Whimsical. By your estimation, I’ve already slithered through your life to ill effect; your antidote is too late.”

“Ahh, I’m willing to give you another chance, Contessa.” I shook my head at his audacity. Too few people are truly audacious. Most people begin beige, borrow reflected color in their youth and return to beige.

“How many of these have you made?”

“I don’t know, dozens I suppose.” Truman placed it on a side table, removed his blazer and unbuttoned his shirtsleeves to roll them. I had the air conditioning on, but this summer in ’82 was the hottest I could remember.

“All for your friends?” I gestured for him to sit down.

“No, some are just creations of things I value,” he ignoring my gesture and actually pacing.

“How many have you given away?” Grabbing my wheels I made my way over to the bar to refresh my drink.

“None.” He’d walked over to the window.

“Till now.”

“Yes.” His back remained turned.

“Are you going to give the others away?”

“No.”

He’d assumed a lot of things about me, but I never thought he assumed I was stupid. I intended to deflate him. Beat him to the punch. I would now give him permission. It was long overdue.

“You don’t intend to leave with this one, don’t you Tru-love?” I spoke gaily.

Truman settled down beside my chair on my yellow Queen Anne. He plucked my silver cigarette case from the book stack and offered me one. I nodded. Lighting two in his mouth, he handed me one. He dragged deeply on it, looking into my eyes, and smiling at me like an affectionate old Falstaff.

“You superstitious old fool,” I frowned. “You brought it along to ward off the evil spirits, or demons, or reds or whatever you are calling them these days.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you are going to kill me.”

“No, Contessa, I can’t. You deserve it of course, but I’m much too sentimental.”

“You can and you will, and I not only give you my permission, I’m demanding you do it.” My voice turned serious. Truman looked startled. Hah, I thought, I may be old, but I’m sure as hell not dull. My hand shook as I held the cigarette to my lips. It wasn’t from fear. It always shook these days. “You will kill me to save yourself.”

“To save myself? That sounds vaguely threatening for a woman confined to a wheelchair.” He motioned to make a menacing gesture, looked at my face, then stopped.

“Remember. Your reason for why people kill themselves. You said so yourself. Someone is torturing you. You want to kill them, but you can’t kill them because you

love them. So you kill yourself instead.” I stared at the snake bite kit. Jet beads covered the lid – his writing was more subtle than this confection.

“I didn’t say that, a character in Mojave says it. You can’t blame a writer for what a character says,” he paused and said softly, perhaps wistfully, “Anyway I thought you only read the reviews.”

“Why bother with the whole thing if you can get to the balls of it in twenty-five words or less?” My memories threatened to flood my eyes.

“I have yet to read a critic so thrifty with words,” Truman replied and I laughed, then coughed. My hands flew to cover my mouth as spittle sprayed. I pretended to ignore this.

“Truman, it was what you thought to do anyway, at least if you don’t get your way, which you won’t. Now do as you intended.” I was weary. I wanted the thing done. I was not made for this unhealthy end; it took more fortitude than I had. I had no intention of being stoic a second longer than I had to. Lord knows, I’d tried to drink myself to death; it simply wasn’t working fast enough. I couldn’t bear to do anything more overt. I did not want to be remembered as a suicide. A lush I don’t mind, everybody from my time drank, but suicide is so discouraging.

“I just came to get my manuscript back,” he spoke quietly.

“Answered Prayers – a perfect title you know.”

“I know.”

“I took it three years ago; you’ve certainly taken your time retrieving it. Why now?”

“Well, it took me a while to figure it out. I thought I’d lost it, misplaced it somewhere.”

“The booze,” I responded, not unkindly.

“The booze.” He nodded, “The coke, the amphetamines, the barbiturates, you name it.”

“Undoubtedly I could.”

“Then, I remembered my doorman saying you’d been by. I thought he’d made a mistake when he first mentioned it. Confused you with someone else. But as I thought about it, it all made sense. The book stacks in my locker. You’d snuck over. I questioned him further. He remembered every detail of how you were dressed, and then I knew for sure. Because of course, you would dress like a spy; it would be half of the fun for you. A Halston-clad version of a spy.” He sat down on the sofa. “So then I waited, I wanted to see if you would do anything with it. Would you call anyone and tell my plans? Would you sell it? Use it to blackmail me? What would you do?” He placed his hand on my forearm. “I actually prayed you’d call me and want to discuss it.”

“More tears are shed over answered prayers,” I answered, reciting the title quote.

He looked at me for a second, pausing, then said, “Then I heard you were dying, and I thought, now’s my chance. You’d want to return it and maybe even renew a friendship. I thought you may be feeling all weepy and regretful - primed for an eleventh-hour reconciliation.”

My eyes stung with tears. I wiped the corners, looked down and reached for his hand, holding it in my lap. “I am not at all regretful. I don’t mind dying in the least. I just wish it would hurry up and happen. You can help me now that you’re here; it works for both of us. You want me dead and so do I.”

He continued as if I hadn’t spoken, his babyish tones now bitter. “I didn’t get to reconcile with Babe. Bill practically stationed pit bulls at the door. He wouldn’t let me apologize.”

“No one would bother keeping people out of here; there isn’t anyone trying to get in,” my voice was firm, even if my body wasn’t. I do not wallow in self-pity, I allowed myself that luxury with Truman once when Christian left, but never again. Then I addressed his comment. “You hurt Babe terribly. You revealed the thing no one else would – her imperfection.”

“And she died to punish me,” I couldn’t tell whether he was getting drunk or was just old. His eyes were red and wet.

“Yes, Truman just to punish you.”

“And you Sunny, are you going to die too, to punish me?”

“You are going to kill me, sweetheart. It’s your penance. You hurt me deeply too, when you took Christian away.”

“Pamela took him away, Sunny,” he exhaled audibly. His eyes looked lucid now. He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. I nearly smiled at the familiar gesture.

“You’re the writer; you played out the plot in your mind long before it occurred. When the time came you orchestrated what you could. I really loved him, Truman. He was the one that made me feel safe, loved, adored. He was the one that made me feel at all. No one else did, or even cared to. You could have been a friend - seen what I was doing and set me straight. Instead, you just pulled me the other way, selfishly or cruelly. I can’t figure out which, can you?”

He looked nonplussed. “I guess I did it because I could - perhaps for both reasons. Life interests me more than fiction. I have a double sense of perception. I sort of see what is good and bad about any situation simultaneously. The ambiguity of any outcome gave me trouble with endings in fiction. In life, the outcomes worked because they were real. I liked to watch.”

“Like a voyeur. We were never real to you.”

“Certainly less real than some. But I was a stock character in your world too,” he shrugged, absently stroking my fingers - always affectionate, my Truman.

“Why did you so desperately want in to that world?”

“I guess I just thought there’d be more to it.” His voice wavered. He looked weary.

“There was when *you* got there. You made it fun, really a kick. We got to press our noses up against your window and peer at ourselves. We realized what a good time we were having thanks to you. Then you destroyed that for us with your goddamn story. I’m not going to give you the rest of Answered Prayers. It’s not even here.”

“Where is it?” He fingers tightened around my wrist. I did not move.

“Penn Station.”

“Not in some locker, I hope.”

I nodded.

“Oh Contessa, how awful, really, you could have done better than that.”

“I never claimed to be creative, sweetheart. The key is not even in my apartment.”

“Why not destroy it then?”

“No good reason, I just didn’t. I suppose I liked the idea of someone discovering it decades later and uncovering our little place on the planet. God knows I can’t hope for any real sense of immortality from Cecily.”

“Did you read it?” He let go of me and stood, walking to the window again. His writer’s need to have an outside opinion wrestled with his anger, I suppose.

“Yes, of course I read it.”

“Well?” He turned toward me. The insecure writer had won. My mind flashed to when he sat at the end of my bed wanting to know how I liked In Cold Blood. The blond boy with the bangs still yearned there in his tarnished eyes. The boy that had been so kind to me following a situation he conspired to create. My mind reeled. I remembered words he said years ago, following the publishing of In Cold Blood. Even though it seemed like the whole universe was embracing his work, it was only Kenneth Tynan’s exceedingly negative review he could quote verbatim. Truman used to tell me, ‘Sunny, I was told not to believe my press if I wanted to stay sane. I only half learned the lesson. The good press washes over me, fleeting as a summer breeze. The bad sticks in the back of my skull like a blood clot throbbing with every doubt I ever entertained.’

Now here I was, his only critic. The only one to read the elusive chapters of a book most people doubted existed. I could tell him anything and there would be no one to refute or corroborate it. He could dismiss my words, but never forget them. They’d dog him to his grave.

“Well?” he repeated tapping his foot ostentatiously, the only part of him that was little now. His eyes looked into mine, and again he held my wrist closely.

I reached for my cigarette case, but couldn't quite bend that far. He lifted it out of reach. His expression altered, his face became quite tender and the look in his eyes seemed to soften. I'd seen that face before – when his dog was dying. I recognized it for what it was – pity. *He* pitied *me*, the little bastard. I lunged and grabbed them; he stumbled back nearly tumbling over a stack. Regaining his balance, he stepped forward and flicked his gold lighter before me. I shook him off and lit it myself.

Filling my lungs, I relaxed my shoulders. “The chapters were terrible Truman. Truly ghastly. Not only had you no right to spill our personal lives carelessly over all those pages – you did so without technique or elegance. It reads like bile. Bile without style. Now there's a fine heading for a review. You were sloppy, pointless and mean. I did you a favor; it would have killed your reputation. Your prose was so pedestrian even Gore would have recognized it as shit and laughed his ass off.” I couldn't seem to stop now that I had begun. I just kept at him, my normally low-scale voice breaking into shrill vowels. “It wasn't even typing Truman. It was cruder. Your stories were like tombstone rubbings. You mashing crayons against a tombstone and rubbing, desperate for any kind of impression. And failing. There was no impression, only malice.” I broke off coughing, then wheezing. When I finally caught my breath I looked over to where he had moved.

The lid of the snakebite kit was open. Truman cradled a needle in one hand; its tip plunged deeply into a small apothecary bottle, the kind with the metal rim. There were

words on the inside of the lid and inside the kit. I wanted to read them. There were even pictures I think. I would have wheeled over to it, but I didn't want to break his concentration. He stared intently. He performed his task so expertly, quick movements small and tidy as a succinct sentence. Placing the needle on the table beside the box he stoppered the bottle and tucked it in his pocket. Turning, he walked to the bar and made a pitcher of martinis. It wouldn't be long now.

"Don't forget the green tomatoes," I called out. He nodded and placed our glasses, the pitcher and my needle on my hand-painted tray. He walked over and placed the tray on a stack of coffee table books.

"Neatly done Tru-love," I said admiringly. He handled the needle like a pro.

"Dr. Max taught us well," he replied with mock reverence.

"Shall I roll up my sleeve or shall we drink first?"

He poured us each a generous helping of martini.

"You're really going to do it, aren't you Tru? I must admit, I didn't think you had the balls." He looked out my spectacular windows onto the park, New York's lungs. We drank in silence for a few minutes.

"Why tell me the book was terrible?" he asked mildly, as if asking whether I take cream with my coffee. I was ready now; I wanted it done, enough examination, enough

recrimination. I must have looked unwilling to dish further because he picked up the needle as if to tempt me to talk. Hoping to get to my murder quickly, I spoke.

“I really loved Christian and I really loved you” He looked at me in wan disbelief. “Yes, Tru, I really did, still do. You killed both relationships for me. I could almost forgive you for Christian. As selfish as your actions were, they were motivated by your love for me. But even that you desecrated when you published *La Cote Basque*, 1965. You made me a one dimensional joke. We were always in on the joke together; you made me the butt of it. So I cut you loose to save face, and then I was really alone. For all your airs and pretenses, writing was the only thing you gave a damn about. So I wanted to take that away from you.”

“And cuss me out, too.” Truman shook his head and placed the needle on the tray again. “Well, I guess that’s that. We’re done here.” This was intended to sound ominous. Standing up, he routed for gloves in the pocket of this blazer and pulled them on slowly and elegantly. He lifted my martini glass from my fingers and carried it into the bathroom. Returning, he picked up the needle and held it between his index finger and middle finger. He wheeled me into my arctic-bright bathroom. Once inside the bathroom, he set my chair beside the sink and held out his arm. I clutched it heavily with both my hands and pushed myself up on my feet.

“Knock the glass,” he instructed. I looked at him, not quite comprehending at first. “Just knock it,” he said again exasperated, widening his eyes, “to make it look like you dropped it, drunkenly.” I nodded and smashed the glass with the back of my hand. It

crumpled with a very satisfying sound. “Now, I’m going to lie you down on the mat here.” Together, we slowly lowered my torso down, finally ending with my head resting in his lap.

I smiled up at him, “This is nice Tru-love. Thank you. I didn’t want to be alone.”

His eyes were shiny with tears. His hands shook as one caressed my hand on my chest. Then gripping my forearm tightly, he brought the needle to it slowly, his tremors increasing. “Just do it,” I whispered, as we waited for him to regain control.

“I can’t,” he said finally, his whole body racked with pathetic sobs. “I’m sorry Contessa. I don’t want to be alone either.”

I looked at him furiously, his last betrayal. I grabbed his hand and with it plunged the needle in myself. “To Hell with me.”

Epilogue

Truman spent his last days in Los Angeles, in his friend Joanne Carson's house on Sunset Boulevard. His missing chapters were never located. He spoke of “A Severe Insult to the Brain,” “And Audrey Wilder Sang,” “Yachts and Things,” and “The Nigger Queen Kosher Café” till he died.

Joanne wasn't swan-caliber. A needy, vulgar little thing, but, she stood by him. Together they played make-believe games. Poring over pages in magazines, photo albums and coffee-table books, they paid imaginary visits to the Coliseum, to Mykonos, ironic since Truman loathed dreary stone monuments, preferring to stay yacht side whenever he had the chance. They often “traveled” to China, a place Truman always planned to visit but never did.

Tru-love died in the home of Joanne Carson on August 25, 1984. If he's here with me I don't know it. At least I had my pretty pictures for a time. I guess I am his footnote after all. Damn that harsh glare.

Author's Note

Anyone familiar with the history of Truman Capote and his swans will, no doubt, quickly 'out' my heroine, Sunny Marcus. Those in the know will remember the real-life woman she represents, Lady Nancy Keith a.k.a. 'Slim' and will recognize the generous liberties I took while fictionalizing her life.

Instead of taking a page from Capote himself, who chose to disguise Slim as Lady Ina Coolbirth in *Answered Prayers*, or from Howard Hawks, Slim's first husband, who stole her name and words when making his movie, *To Have and Have Not*, but left her life alone, I chose to keep parts of her story and fictionalize large bits as I saw fit. Two bits of fiction I must cop to are those about the two most important ladies in Lady Keith's life, her mother and her real daughter, Kitty (whom I call Cecily). The former was never a courtesan in any way shape or form, and the latter enjoyed a wonderful, loving relationship with her mother as discussed in Slim Keith's real life biography. The joy of fiction is one can shape the world as you would like and put your characters through hell or in hell for the sheer whimsy of it.

My Sunny, Capote's Lady Coolbirth and Hawks' Slim are all pale facsimiles of the lady herself. We have taken liberties, popped words in her mouth and otherwise altered and arranged her to suit our purposes. Would she mind? Absolutely. Many of the things these characters do and say don't represent her at all. But then, perhaps, she'd shake her head, amazed we were still dishing the dirt after all these years. The more I came to know of Slim Keith, the more she dominated my imagination. I have no doubt

her influence will continue, for while the rest of Capote's swans are currently celebrated in the retro-mod craze for perfection and structure, Slim Keith stands alone. Her casual elegance is timeless as a witty phrase, a knowing glance, an effortless swan dive.

Vita

As a senior editor with the now defunct **Modern Woman** magazine, Canada's (then) fastest growing magazine, Tonya Walker supervised, edited and wrote fashion, beauty, food and décor features. She drew on nearly six years of writing and production experience to show fashion trends that work in the real world on real women. Scouring the markets she developed a reputation for discovering affordable clothing and cosmetics her readers could relate to.

Tonya has honed her advertising and editorial copy skills by working with corporate and editorial clients such as The Body Shop, Canderm Pharma Inc., Dep Canada Inc., **Chatelaine magazine**, **Richmond Times Dispatch**, **Harrowsmith Monthly**, and **Today's Parent** magazine.

Born in Toronto, Tonya graduated from the University of Western Ontario with a degree in English Literature and Sociology. Upon graduation she embarked on the requisite European tour and returned to Toronto to discover an intimate knowledge of backpacks and hostels didn't count as valid work experience. However, her unparalleled phone skills, marketed with her ability to fax and photocopy with dogged enthusiasm soon lead to copywriting opportunities for such clients as Radio Shack and Canadian Airlines.

A resident of Richmond for seven years, Tonya is currently at home with her two children, has completed her first novel and is finishing her M.F.A. at Virginia Commonwealth University before she, too, becomes defunct.